



Faith, Politics, and Place:

Comparing Religious Political Engagement Across Rural and Urban America

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationships between location, religious affiliation, and political behavior. The research factor of location is separated into two groups: rural and urban individuals. Religious affiliation is measured in several ways, but self-identified religious identity is the primary characteristic used to determine it. Several forms of political behavior are examined, including voting, legislative advocacy, lobbying, and public protests. This paper utilizes a combination of polling data, analysis publications, individual testimony, and opinion pieces to provide a comprehensive understanding of how politics operate in America, from both a technical (data-driven) and a practical (individual-based) perspective. The study's results yield several key conclusions. First, location does affect voting; rural voters have a unique set of struggles, morals, and experiences that more often inspire a Republican vote. Urban voters, and their unique struggles, morals, and experiences, tend to correlate more often with a Democratic vote. Religious affiliation often inspires morals and values. Paired with the experiences faced in different environments, we see connections between location, religious affiliation, and political behavior. Understanding the interplay among these three factors is crucial for understanding the future of American politics.

Keywords: *American Voter Attitudes, Rural–Urban Divide, Religious Affiliation, Political Behavior, Democratic Participation*

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1. Introduction

The research presented in this paper aims to provide clarity on how religion influences political decisions and democratic participation. For a well-rounded approach, the research collected will encompass various aspects of engaging in democracy.

By analyzing the religious motivations of voters, policy and interactions with faith, and other engagements with democracy, such as advocacy, lobbying, and protesting, we will gain greater insight into how the role of religion is evolving in America.

To further understand some divides in American politics, this research paper will focus on examining differences in religious motivations between urban and rural areas. Urban areas are more diverse than rural areas in many different demographics, including religious affiliation. We see stark differences in how urban cities and rural communities vote in elections. Urban counties overwhelmingly vote Democrat, suggesting a connection with lower religiosity and a higher number of Democratic votes. Rural areas vote strongly Republican, and many rural communities have become increasingly Republican over time. The high rates of Christianity in rural areas imply religion plays a strong role in decisions at the polls. Exploring the connections between urban and rural communities and how they interact with religion is also telling for how religion is evolving in America.

This essay is a compilation of news articles, research publications, and testimony from field experts. Using these resources, I try to paint a well-rounded picture of American life. This essay will examine the interplay between politics, religion, socioeconomic status, healthcare, and community relationships to understand how these factors influence one another.

The overall goal of this essay is to examine the various ways in which religion influences a changing American democracy. Political polarization is ubiquitous. Most policy issues are highly divided among politicians and voters alike. However, there is much more common ground than what is apparent at the surface level. By examining differences and similarities, we can gain greater clarity on what informs voters, influences their decisions, and visualize the next steps for American politics.

2. Political Engagement in Rural America

2.1 Rural Politics and Religion

In American democracy, rural communities are often viewed as the heartland of the nation. These communities are often characterized by their traditional values, agricultural contributions, and close-knit social fabric. However, understanding rural America is far more complex than these ideas. To fully grasp the political behavior of rural residents, we must define what “rural” means and then examine the experiences, beliefs, and challenges that these communities face.

It remains challenging to classify which communities are considered rural. The *National Center for Health Statistics* (NCHS) suggests that 13.8% of Americans live in non-urban or rural communities. In contrast, the U.S. Department of Agriculture *Economic Research Service* (ERS) suggests that 28.4% of Americans live in non-urban or rural communities.¹ Although the varying answers may cause some confusion, these figures are important in understanding demographics. Understanding who lives in rural America provides a foundation for analyzing broader political patterns. We can use these figures to understand trends regarding voting, policy, and religious participation.

“To fully grasp the political behavior of rural residents, we must *define* what “rural” means and then *examine* the *experiences, beliefs, and challenges* that these communities face.”

Once we establish a basic understanding of rural demographics, it is important to examine the internal diversity among these communities. Not all of rural America has the same resources, and this can impact voter participation. In a 2008 Issue Brief published by the *Carsey Institute* titled “Religion, Politics, and the Environment in Rural America,” we see differences in conditions across the country. The authors find that 13% of the entire rural population resides in amenity-rich communities located in the Rocky Mountains, while another 13% live in declining, resource-dependent communities in the Midwest.

¹ Igielnik, R. (2019, November 22). *Evaluating what makes a U.S. community urban, suburban or rural*. Pew Research Center.

Approximately 35% of rural Americans reside in communities transitioning from amenity-rich to resource-dependent, declining areas. These clusters are located in the Northeast and Northwest. Moreover, finally, 40% of rural Americans are located in chronically poor communities in the Southeast.² These distinctions underscore that rural life is not monotonous. Economic opportunity, geography, and infrastructure vary widely and significantly impact political engagement.

Resources have been declining in a majority of rural communities for an extended period, and this is reflected in the polls. In addition to economic patterns, social and cultural similarities among rural residents contribute to a sense of unity and identity. A significant aspect of rural communities is that many residents share commonalities with their neighbors. We observe similarities in community demographics, including economic status, race, and religion. The *Carsey School of Public Policy's* 2022 National Issue Brief, using the 2020 Census data, shows that 76% of rural America is non-Hispanic white.³ These shared characteristics can influence not only personal values but also political behaviors, such as voting, legislative engagement, and participation in protests.

Thus, we can see rural America experiences politics differently from its urban counterparts. When we shift our focus to democratic participation, rural communities face a unique set of barriers. First, distance can play a role in who is voting. Low accessibility is a cause of disenfranchisement in rural communities. Second, voting often requires some knowledge of candidates. The voting process can involve learning about candidates, reviewing information, and making an informed decision. This task can be challenging, especially given the current state of politics. Politics is highly divisive, and residents often lack access to the same information, including internet resources, news, and opportunities to attend rallies or participate in political organizations, as their urban counterparts do.

“...distance can play a role in who is voting. Low accessibility is a cause of disenfranchisement in rural communities.”

² Dillon, M., & Henly, M. (Fall 2008). *Religion, Politics, and the Environment in Rural America*. Carsey Institute, University of New Hampshire, (3).

³ Johnson, K. M., & Lichter, D. (Spring 2022). *Growing Racial Diversity in Rural America: Results from the 2020 Census*. Carsey School of Public Policy, University of New Hampshire, (163).

“Health and Voting in Rural America,” a research article from *Frontiers in Political Science*, effectively summarizes these struggles. The authors write, “The motivating idea here is that voting is ‘costly’—requiring some baseline of time, attention, and knowledge to participate. Several potential obstacles can add to this cost, including voter registration rules and forms, residency and identification requirements, locating and traveling to the correct polling location, and ensuring that applicable deadlines are met.”⁴ These logistical and informational barriers disproportionately affect rural voters, contributing to lower political participation.

Despite these challenges, rural voters wield significant power in American elections. In an American democracy, presidential elections are based on the Electoral College, where each state receives a certain number of votes, and those votes are cast for a specific candidate. However, the electorates are not always representative of the entire population. Rural states sometimes have the advantage of inflated power. In an opinion piece titled “Are White Rural Americans the Real Threat to American Democracy?,” David Corn writes that this phenomenon is very real. He argues, “Let’s start with the numbers. As you know, rural voters generally and rural white non-college voters wield inflated power. They do so in the highly malapportioned Senate, where two senators represent smaller rural states. And because the Electoral College is based on the number of House seats and two senators in every state, they possess outsize power there.”⁵ We can see an example of Corn’s argument by examining the 2016 presidential election. Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by nearly 2.9 million votes, yet Donald Trump still won the presidency through the electoral college. One explanation for this is that Donald Trump was able to win many rural states, which secured him the necessary electoral votes, despite being unable to gain popularity in densely populated urban areas. So while the inflated power in rural America may not be explicit, this imbalance highlights the vital role rural voters play in shaping the outcome of national elections.

“..., [in the Electoral College] the electorates are not always representative of the entire population. Rural states sometimes have the advantage of inflated power.”

⁴ Cahill, K. A., & Ojeda, C. (2021). *Health and Voting in Rural America*. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 3.

⁵ Corn, D. (2024, March 5). *Are White Rural Americans the Real Threat to Democracy?* Mother Jones.

Another defining element of rural political identity is religion. Rural communities tend to be more religious than urban ones, and high levels of religiosity play a significant role in voting behavior. Exit polls from recent presidential elections reveal that white Christians, a majority of whom are located in rural America, overwhelmingly supported Republican candidate Donald Trump. In “Religion and the 2024 Presidential Election” from *Public Religion Research Institute* (PRRI), we find important data showing solidarity among this demographic. The PRRI writes, “White evangelical Protestants remain the most vital religious constituency of the Republican Party, with more than eight in ten white evangelicals voting for former President Donald Trump. Six in ten white Catholics and white mainline/non-evangelical Protestants also voted for Trump. Edison Exit Polls show that 72% of white Christians voted for Trump.”⁶

“Exit polls from recent presidential elections reveal that *white Christians*, a majority of whom are located in *rural America*, overwhelmingly supported *Republican* candidate Donald Trump.”

Similarly, religious participation, such as weekly church attendance, showed correlations in the presidential election. In “Analyzing the 2024 Presidential Vote: PRRI’s Post-Election Survey,” PRRI also finds these connections. They find, “While solid majorities of white evangelical Protestants overwhelmingly supported Trump across all levels of church attendance, weekly church attenders reported voting for Trump at significantly higher levels (88%) than those who seldom or never attend church (77%). White Catholics who attend church weekly report voting for Trump at higher levels (64%) than those who attend monthly (58%) or seldom/never (56%).”⁷ These patterns indicate that religious identity not only shaped personal values, but these values also play a part in forming political identity in rural America.

Building on economic, religious, and demographic trends, a new concept has emerged that may help explain why we observe such widespread similarities in political behavior across rural America. Many political scientists and sociologists agree that a new “rural identity” has emerged over the past few decades, one grounded in shared experiences of hardship and perceived marginalization.

⁶ Public Religion Research Institute. (2024, November 8). *Religion and the 2024 Presidential Election*. PRRI.

⁷ Public Religion Research Institute. (2024, December 13). *Analyzing the 2024 Presidential Vote: PRRI’s Post-Election Survey*. PRRI.

“Building on *economic, religious, and demographic trends*, a new concept, [*rural identity*], has emerged that may help explain why we observe such *widespread similarities* in *political behavior across rural America*.”

This identity transcends population-based or geographic definitions of rural, instead manifesting itself culturally and psychologically. In “Health and Voting in Rural America,” the authors find that cultural and psychological factors form this new identity. They write, “Rural consciousness’ is the term I am using to describe a strong sense of identity as a rural person combined with a strong sense that rural areas are the victims of injustice: the sense that rural areas do not get their fair share of power, respect, or resources and that rural folks prefer lifestyles that differ fundamentally from those of city people.”⁸ For rural voters, these thoughts are not limited to one political party. Research has shown that distrust is not exclusive to any one group. A study from *American Politics Research* shows rural identity is deeper than party politics. Eric Dolan summarizes this research, writing, “The persistence of rural distrust, even under a Republican president, suggests that there is a deeper, more ingrained skepticism in rural communities that transcends party politics.”⁹ The skepticism in the government’s ability to regulate rural life, whether through economic or social policies, significantly influences rural identity. This skepticism, paired with their belief of cultural alienation, paves the way for a new “rural identity”; one that is important in considering politics in rural America. In many cases, disillusioned rural voters find relief through religious faith. High levels of religiosity, particularly Christianity, in rural communities show patterns that connect religion as a marker of rural identity. In connection with rural identity, we see religion being used as a coping mechanism with otherwise adverse conditions in rural areas. Again, in “Religion, Politics, and the Environment in Rural America,” the authors theorize that religion may be used as a coping mechanism for addressing adverse conditions. They write, “...being born-again may provide an anchor amidst dwindling community resources.”¹⁰

⁸ Cahill, K. A., & Ojeda, C. (2021). *Health and Voting in Rural America*. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 3.

⁹ Dolan, E. W. (2024, October 23). *New Study: Rural Americans Trust Government Less, No Matter Who’s President*. PsyPost.

¹⁰ Dillon, M., & Henly, M. (Fall 2008). *Religion, Politics, and the Environment in Rural America*.

“...*skepticism*, paired with [*the*] belief of *cultural alienation*, paves the way for a new “rural identity”; one that is important in considering *politics in rural America*.”

These ideas do not only apply to coping with poor economic conditions. The same theory can apply to a changing social or cultural identity that comes with being white and Christian in America. Being born again provides stability to rural identity that is not found in American institutions.

Importantly, research suggests that rural identity may be a stronger predictor of rural behavior than government designations. Whether considering the economic, social, or religious factors of rural identity, there are higher connections between rural identity and voting behavior than geographic factors. The shared experiences of rural voters are vital in rural communities. If a community feels like a disenfranchised, disadvantaged voter, then we will see a reflection of that identity in the polls. Later, we will discuss how religion, the economy, and a changing cultural landscape in America manifest in American democracy. However, for these conversations, we need a solid foundation of understanding rural identity.

2.2 Voting Behavior in State and Federal Elections

After understanding rural identity, we can examine voting patterns in rural America that illustrate these concepts. After analyzing voting trends, we reveal important insights into democratic engagement among rural populations. The rural vote has been growing more Republican over the past several decades. For example, in the 2020 presidential election, roughly $\frac{2}{3}$ of non-metro votes went to Donald Trump. This is more than 20 points higher than the numbers in metropolitan counties.¹¹ Similar findings are observed in the 2024 election. According to *AP VoteCast*, 62% of rural voters chose the Republican nominee, Donald Trump. The 2024 presidential election was also notable in that it saw a 4% shift to the right compared to the 2020 election.¹²

¹¹ Slack, T. (2024, October 28). *LSU Expert in Social and Economic Issues: Rural America's Unique Struggles Affect How It Votes*. Louisiana State University.

¹² Perkins, J., Bleifuss, J., & Alvarez, P. (2024, December 4). *Rural America in the 2024 Election: Key Races and Ballot Measures*. Barn Raiser.

“Whether considering the economic, social, or religious factors of rural identity, there are *higher connections* between *rural identity* and *voting behavior* than *geographic factors*.”

This means that many counties saw a higher frequency of Republican votes than before, noting a trend in this recent election. Further emphasizing this shift, we can examine the performance of the Democratic Party. Also in the 2024 presidential election, democratic nominee Kamala Harris underperformed in many rural counties, especially in swing states. Notably, Kamala Harris underperformed in Black rural counties in North Carolina and Georgia. Although voters may have traditionally voted Democrat, the election marked a rightward shift. In the 2024 presidential elections, the Rural Democracy Initiative reports that Republicans won in the mid-sized city, small city/town, and rural classifications.¹³ Depending slightly on the classifications used to determine which population is considered for these categories, the data clearly show that Donald Trump won both the popular vote and the Electoral College in the 2024 election.

This pattern extends beyond the presidential race and into state-level contests. The 2024 congressional elections show many districts flipping red. In Alaska District 1, Republican Nick Begich III beat out incumbent Democrat Mary Peltola. In Colorado District 8, Republican Gabe Evans beat incumbent Democrat Yadira Caraveo. Republican incumbents in rural districts are also successfully winning their close races against Democratic candidates. Republican David Valadao beat Democrat Rudy Salas, Jr. in California District 22. Republican Zach Nunn held off Democrat Lanon Baccam in Iowa District 3. In Nebraska District 2, Republican Don Bacon narrowly defeated Democrat Tony Vargas. In Wisconsin District 3, Christian nationalist Derrick Van Orden defended his seat against Democrat Rebecca Cooke in a close race.¹⁴ Together, these victories indicate a strengthening Republican foothold in rural communities and among working-class Americans.

“[*State-level*] victories indicate a strengthening *Republican foothold* in *rural communities* and among *working-class Americans*.”

¹³ Rural Democracy Initiative. (2025, Jul 26). *Rural Dashboard Updated with 2024 Results*. RDI.

¹⁴ Perkins, J., Bleifuss, J., & Alvarez, P. (2024, December 4). *Rural America in the 2024 Election*.

The results from both the state and federal elections in 2024 clearly illustrate a continued rightward shift in rural America. Not only are many counties flipping red, but many already Republican counties are showing higher frequencies of Republican votes. These trends raise important questions. Why are Republicans seeing more success in rural communities? How have they managed to overcome the barriers of political engagement in rural America? The answer may lie outside of policy; we will later examine patterns beyond policy goals to address these questions. Nonetheless, rural voters' choices at the ballot box offer valuable insight into the future of democracy and rural America.

3. Political Engagement in Urban America

3.1 Urban Politics and Religion

Urban communities are much more religiously diverse than rural communities. This diversity has direct implications for how individuals in urban areas engage in politics. We see unique issues at the intersections of urban politics, religious affiliation, and democratic participation. Unsurprisingly, there are larger shares of the religiously unaffiliated, or nones, than there are in rural areas. The PRRI estimates 20-25% of Americans consider themselves unaffiliated, and we see metro areas hitting or surpassing these estimates.¹⁵ There are a few outliers where we observe higher percentages of 'nones' than the national average. 37% of Seattle residents are unaffiliated, 52% are Christian, and 10% identify with another religion. San Francisco is 35% unaffiliated, and Boston is 33% unaffiliated.¹⁶ Also from the Public Religion Research Institute, they report, "Around two-thirds of residents of these most densely populated counties claim a Christian affiliation (66% in Big Cities and 68% in Urban Suburbs), while six percent of residents of each of the county types claim a non-Christian affiliation. More than one-quarter of residents of Big Cities (28%) and Urban Suburbs (26%) are religiously unaffiliated." Beyond the religious makeup of urban communities, these demographic patterns carry significant implications for civic behavior and democratic engagement.

¹⁵ Public Religion Research Institute. (2022, April 18). *Religious Stereotypes vs. Reality in Urban, Suburban, and Rural America*. PRRI.

¹⁶ Lipka, M. (2015, July 29). *Major U.S. Metropolitan Areas Differ in their Religious Profiles*. Pew Research Center.

“The Public Religion Research Institute estimates 20-25% of Americans consider themselves [*religiously*] unaffiliated, and we see metro areas hitting or surpassing these estimates.”

Not only can we find significance in the higher rates of religious affiliation, but higher rates of religious diversity overall can have significant effects on political engagement. For some voters, religious affiliation does not significantly influence their voting decisions at the polls. For others, the exposure to other individuals, cultures, and experiences provides them with perspectives that extend beyond their own experiences. These voters are more likely to fight for the rights and protections of other identities as well as their own. To be clear, rural voters are not necessarily indifferent to the needs of others. However, the lived experiences of urban residents clearly influence their political leanings, just as the homogeneity in rural communities influences their voting behavior. In this way, the religious diversity in urban areas plays an active role in shaping worldviews, therefore impacting the urban vote.

Although urban areas are home to more religiously unaffiliated individuals, this does not equate to a lack of religious participation. Church attendance is one demographic indicator that highlights this idea. Contrary to popular belief, many urban residents maintain strong religious practices, even in highly secular environments. Some religious urban voters actually demonstrate higher church participation, as measured by church attendance, than their rural counterparts. A survey from the *Cooperative Election Study* reports, “Lower income rural people attend services more often than urban people. But higher income urban people attend more often than rural people.”¹⁷ This evidence counters claims that urban areas are less religious than rural areas. Among specific different demographics, there are actually higher levels of participation, indicating the same dedication is displayed in urban areas as it is in rural areas. We can use this information to establish that, since urban areas are no less religious, other factors play into political engagement. We can examine how urban voters utilize various experiences to inform their voting decisions.

¹⁷ Melotte, S. (2023, November 9). *Survey: Rural People Don’t Practice Religion More Than Urban Peers*. The Daily Yonder.

“...the *lived experiences of urban residents* clearly influence their *political leanings*, just as the *homogeneity in rural communities* influences their *voting behavior*.”

Moving beyond religion, it is equally important to examine how urban voters differ from rural voters in key policy issues. Top issues in the 2024 election included the economy, social values, public safety, and healthcare.¹⁸ While there are some shared experiences between urban and rural voters, urban residents might often have different perspectives on these issues. Rising crime rates in cities like New York City and Chicago are a concern for urban voters. Some questioned the toughness of Harris’ policies for addressing crime, while they felt Trump was tougher on crime. Rural voters, often separated by distance, do not experience the same interactions with crime as urban residents do. Urban residents experience inflation differently as well. Cities are becoming increasingly expensive to live in. It is becoming increasingly apparent that urban voters are concerned about food prices, rent, healthcare, and other issues.

Overcrowding and the housing shortage are more prevalent in urban areas than in rural areas. Cities are highly populated and continue to experience upward trends in population growth. Living in cities also comes with unique health issues that are not as prevalent in rural communities. Urban residents are more likely to experience lung problems and cancers due to emissions and congestion. Similar to rural communities, urban residents also face a lack of affordable, accessible healthcare. Ultimately, urban voters are often motivated by immediate, lived experiences rather than ideological or cultural factors. For urban voters, these issues often transcend religious affiliation. Urban voters are much more likely to view these issues as superficial, believing that they are a result of legislation and policy that either benefits or harms their communities. This pragmatic approach to politics underscores a broad shift toward issue-based voting in urban areas. We can apply broader sociological theories to explain urban secularization. Jungyeon Lee applies theories to the declining influence religion may have on modern societies. Lee writes, “Durkheim predicted that as societies become more modernized and complex, traditional religion would decline in public influence, transforming into a more private and individualistic form of belief while still maintaining some societal function through a shared ‘collective consciousness’.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Nadeem, R. (2024, September 9). *Issues and the 2024 Election*. Pew Research Center.

¹⁹ Lee, J. (2025). *Religion and Demographic Shifts: Analyzing Population Trends Using Durkheim’s Theory*. Center for Faith, Identity & Globalization.

“...urban voters are often motivated by immediate, lived experiences rather than ideological or cultural factors. For urban voters, these issues often transcend religious affiliation.”

We see this idea translated best in urban areas. Religious affiliation is not reflected in the polls the same way it is in rural communities. While urban areas experience greater religious diversity, there is by no means a lack of religiosity in these areas, despite higher numbers of nones. Religiosity is presented in other ways, as a personal expression rather than a main contribution to identity. Evidence shows that urban residents are less likely to vote based on traditional Christian values. They are more likely to keep their religious participation separate from their civic engagement, and this is reflected in the polls. Durkheim’s theory helps explain why religion in urban spaces is less about institutional influence and more about private identity.

Through an analysis of urban life, we come to understand that urban residents navigate a complex and diverse social landscape that shapes their beliefs. A combination of diversity, personal experiences, religion, and other cultural factors shapes beliefs that inform democratic participation. Similar to rural communities, we will utilize various aspects of urban life to explain urban voting patterns and the evolution of beliefs.

3.2 Voting Behavior in State and Federal Elections

In recent years, American voting patterns have become increasingly polarized between urban and rural communities. Understanding these differences is crucial for comprehending how the economy, social values, and religion shape voting decisions. By examining datasets from recent federal elections, we can begin to understand how voting behaviors in urban areas are evolving. When examining rural voting in recent elections, we observed that many counties are becoming increasingly red.

“[Urban voters] are more likely to keep their religious participation separate from their civic engagement, and this is reflected in the polls. Durkheim’s theory helps explain why religion in urban spaces is less about institutional influence and more about private identity.”

In contrast, when examining urban areas, growth in the Democratic Party is limited to the wealthiest parts of cities. In an opinion article by the *New York Times*, Shane Goldmacher writes, “Even more ominous for the Democrats are the demographic and economic characteristics of these counties: The party’s sparse areas of growth are concentrated almost exclusively in America’s wealthiest and most educated pockets.”²⁰ Interestingly, these Americans are the least dependent on the social support systems most commonly supported by the Democratic Party. The lack of growth among lower-income urban populations, traditionally a reliable demographic for the Democratic Party, presents a concerning trend for the party.

“The *lack of growth among lower-income urban populations, traditionally a reliable demographic for the Democratic Party, presents a concerning trend for the party.*”

Although urban America has historically leaned Democratic, the recent presidential election revealed a shift to the right in many urban counties. While electors cast their votes for Kamala Harris in the 2024 election, Republican candidate Donald Trump gained support in several urban areas. This development raises important questions about why the Republican Party is experiencing growth in areas once dominated by the Democratic Party. In the following sections of this essay, we will examine the various ways the political landscape is evolving and how this affects the urban vote.

The rightward shift in urban communities is not limited to federal elections; it is also becoming increasingly evident in state elections. One example of this broader trend is evident in the voting patterns of counties with a majority Black population. Also in the *New York Times* opinion article, Goldmacher writes, “Those incursions predated 2024: More counties with a majority of Black voters shifted toward the Republicans in each of the last three elections (58) than the total number of counties nationwide that trended toward Democrats (57).” Republican growth has outpaced that of the Democratic Party in many key counties, many of which, when combined, can have a significant impact on an election.

²⁰ Goldmacher, S. (2025, July 14). *How Donald Trump Has Remade America’s Political Landscape*. The New York Times.

Understanding the political power cities hold at the state level is crucial for interpreting these election outcomes. Evidence suggests that the state government has a strong correlation with what legislators can get passed. In an article published in the *American Journal of Political Science*, the authors examine the significant role cities play in state government. They write, “Cities almost surely believe they are more likely to receive aid from their state government when issue priorities are similar between them and their state governments and when Democrats rule the state legislature. For liberal cities in conservative states, however, these conditions are rarely met.”²¹ We can find issues in this disconnect when considering the rightward shift in many counties in blue states. Many formerly Democratic districts shifted to the Republican side in the 2024 elections. Several key counties in California and Colorado flipped from blue to red, having significant implications for state-level policymaking. If votes continue to trend in the same direction, it could mean Democrats might lose their dominance in their states. Optimistically for the Democratic Party, many margins were very narrow, suggesting that the two parties are closer than previously thought, implying that diversity is growing even more in urban areas. Overall, the shifts we see in both federal and state politics represent a subtle change in political loyalties. While rural areas continue to lean more Republican, urban areas are no longer guaranteed to be Democratic strongholds. As the economic, social, and cultural landscapes continue to evolve, both parties must adapt their policies to keep pace with the changing needs of the American people.

4. Motivations of Rural and Urban Voters

4.1 Perceptions of Political Candidates

The perceptions of political candidates often play a significant role in shaping public opinion and influencing election outcomes. How voters view political candidates can make or break the outcome. Examining the differences in perceptions between rural and urban voters can provide valuable insights into the factors that influence their decisions. There are many examples we can look to, as election cycles often become less policy-based and more ideologically centered. Similarly, examining the religious motivations of some voters informs us about the role faith plays in the democratic process.

²¹ Goldstein, R., & You, H. Y. (2017). *Cities as Lobbyists*. *American Journal of Political Science*, 61(4), 864–876.

“As the *economic, social, and cultural landscapes* continue to *evolve*, both parties must adapt their policies to keep pace with the *changing needs* of the American people.”

To begin, rural voters offer a compelling example of how candidate perception and religious affiliation can influence election outcomes. Rural voters were a key demographic in Donald Trump’s 2024 presidential election victory. Trump paid close attention to white, rural voters throughout his campaign. His targeted outreach was successful, as he won 80-85% of this group, or 20% of the total electorate, in the 2024 presidential election. This represents the highest margins of support ever recorded. Rural voters were confident that Trump would defend their interests, and many believed he genuinely values their way of life. In “Christian Nationalism and the Vote for Donald Trump in the 2024 Presidential Election: A State-Level Analysis,” the authors argue that Trump employed a targeted campaign to garner support. They write, “As in prior campaigns, Trump appealed directly to religious conservatives, promising to bring them back into positions of power. He warned that Christianity in the United States was under attack and pledged that when he was President, Christianity would be returned to dominance.”²² This messaging resonated with many rural voters, as Trump related to their religious and cultural values. The 2024 presidential election results we saw are a unique intersection of both religious appreciation and conservative ideologies. However, rural Christian voters often struggle to find that same confidence in democratic nominees. The Democratic Party is often perceived as the party of elites, a perception that does not resonate with rural voters.

This perception is evident in the past, where Democrats have frequently used campaign funds to focus on suburban and micropolitan areas, often leaving many potential rural voters behind. Rural voters’ perceptions of the Democratic Party remain unchanged despite a lack of campaigning in these areas. Rural voters find much more comfort in seeing themselves and their values represented in elections through the Republican Party. The Republican Party admires and honors the culture of being a white Christian American. The Democratic Party does not focus on these same ideas. Not to mention, the Democratic Party was not seen as a united front. Joe Biden stepping down from the race, the Israel/Gaza conflict, and other hot-topic issues, such as abortion, gun control, and Medicaid, only further divided voters and turned potential supporters towards Donald Trump.

²² Whitehead, A. L. & Perry S. L. (2025, June 3). *Christian Nationalism and the Vote for Donald Trump in the 2024 Presidential Election: A State-Level Analysis*. Nations & Nationalism.

“*Rural voters find much more comfort in seeing themselves and their values represented in elections through the Republican Party.*”

Kamala Harris and the Democratic Party were not able to convince enough rural voters that their policies would benefit rural America. Among rural religious voters, one particular subgroup can offer insight into how religious identity serves as a basis for political behavior. Christian nationalism is a hard term to impose on such a large portion of voters. We observed interesting trends emerge during the 2024 election. Donald Trump appealed to the idea that white Christian voters were an important part of his campaign. He built on a reasonably common, but not scientifically sound, theory that the Christian population was decreasing and losing its social and cultural standing. This brought about great support from Christian nationalists, a group that has existed for a long time but distinctly became more vocal during Donald Trump’s campaign. Donald Trump did appeal to the idea that Christianity should be the “principal and undisputed cultural foundation” of the United States. Furthermore, “Americans who embrace Christian nationalism are motivated to endorse Donald Trump as their chosen leader as an expression of this group identity, the true Americans working to Make America Great Again, to the point of overlooking ethical or moral failings of their leader.”²³ This narrative helped Trump mobilize a devoted base that was eager to restore the power and cultural standing of White evangelicals through democratic processes.

However, Trump’s religious appeal extended beyond religious extremists like Christian nationalists. In conversations regarding religion and support for Donald Trump, we can exclude Christian nationalists and still find that religious voters resonated with Donald Trump’s campaign. The *Associated Press* published an article in May 2024, about five months before the presidential election, that interviewed evangelical Republicans who are supporting Trump. Many of the voters interviewed for this article expressed that Trump was able to align himself with Christians.

“Donald Trump did appeal to the idea that *Christianity* should be the ‘*principal and undisputed cultural foundation*’ of the United States.”

²³ Whitehead, A. L. & Perry S. L. (2025, June 3). *Christian Nationalism and the Vote for Donald Trump in the 2024 Presidential Election*.

Jody Picagli from Englewood, Ohio, said her Catholic faith and the values she has gotten from it informed her decision. She says, “I’m a big right-to-life person... That’s huge for me. And just morals. I think the moral compass is so out of whack right now. And we need religion and church back in here.”²⁴ Robert Jones, with the PRRI, agrees that Trump often appeals directly to these white, rural voters. Jones writes, “He added that Trump’s rhetoric about immigrants’ ‘invading the country and changing our cultural heritage’ resonates with his audience.”²⁵ Through targeted outreach, Trump showed a large portion of voters that their religious values and cultural identity were important to his campaign.

In urban areas, we often see a lack of Christian nationalist movements that are prevalent in rural areas. This is not due to a lack of religion in these areas, but rather the greater diversity of residents. The increased diversity of perspectives often encourages urban voters to become more accepting of others, thus causing many urban residents to shy away from the Christian nationalist movement. Census data tells us that rural communities are mostly exposed to others who are very similar to themselves; often white, often Christian, and often Republican. Urban area demographics show differences not only in religious affiliation, but also in race, gender, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Urban residents often find their values most represented by Democratic party candidates. The emphasis on diversity and equality attracts urban voters. Thus, religion does not typically play a significant role in urban residents’ perceptions of political candidates. It is much more likely that candidates are selected based on qualifications, policy, or another outside factor.

Since religion is not a central factor in many political decisions in urban areas, we can consider the external factors that contributed to the rightward shift observed in many urban counties. Urban areas are facing intense problems, including high housing costs, job shortages, and inflation at alarming rates. These issues are important enough to urban voters that they can overlook Donald Trump’s shortcomings.

 **Robert Jones...agrees that Trump often *appeals directly* to these *white, rural voters*.**

²⁴ Smith, P. (2024, May 18). *Jesus is their Savior, Trump is their Candidate*. AP News.

²⁵ Public Religion Research Institute. (2023, October 25). *Threats to American Democracy Ahead of an Unprecedented Presidential Election*. PRRI.

For example, many urban residents approve of abortion being legal in most cases, yet Trump was a key participant in overturning protections for abortion. However, Trump saw multiple-point increases in urban areas. Democrats did not do enough to convince urban voters that they could address the issues that concern them. In this case, policy and other campaign failures outweighed previous identification with the party.

Altogether, the 2024 election revealed that voter perceptions of political candidates have a profound effect on election outcomes. Voter perceptions, whether they are shaped by religion, cultural identity, or socioeconomic status, continue to play a significant role in political behavior. Rural voters rallied around Donald Trump's appeal to their identity. Urban voters had lost faith in the Democratic Party's ability to handle social crises important to them, and many were driven to cast their votes for other candidates. Regardless, perceptions of political candidates and their campaigns are central in understanding political engagement across rural and urban America.

“...perceptions of political candidates and their campaigns are central in understanding *political engagement across rural and urban America.*”

4.2 Moral Judgements of Political Candidates

In American politics, moral judgment plays a decisive role in shaping political beliefs. As the United States continues to become increasingly polarized, understanding the moral frameworks that guide political decisions can provide insight into the motivations behind these decisions. Moral judgements often come from religious experiences. The moral judgements voters hold often play an important role in deciding who to vote for. Moral foundations are the core of political decisions. According to moral foundations theory, people weigh their values differently, including the differences observed in conservatives and liberals. For example, rural voters tend to value loyalty and authority more heavily, while urban voters emphasize care and fairness. These variations help explain the persistent divide we see in voting patterns. To further this, rural voters, who overwhelmingly vote Republican, hold more conservative values. These come from the diverse experiences of rural voters. The first builds off their social standing. Rural residents are often divided from urban residents in their lifestyles. Rural residents are used to being mostly independent from others.

Often, rural residents are economically disadvantaged, meaning they are frugal, cautious, and determined to work their way up from their starting point. These values have been acknowledged in the rural community for a long time. In “Trump Gave Them Hope: Studying the Strangers in Their Own Land,” published in *Political Communication*, Daniel Kreiss argues that moral beliefs influence political behavior. “The idea of ‘hard work’ as moral worth extended to contrasts between White laborers working with their hands and government bureaucrats and professionals working with their minds. This, in turn, was linked to their perception that the government does not work for them and rewards the “takers” while punishing the “makers” (Hochschild, 2016, p. 149), which in turn informs their negative attitudes about governmental regulation.”²⁶ This only serves to exacerbate the separation between rural voters and political candidates.

“Often, *rural residents are economically disadvantaged, meaning they are frugal, cautious, and determined to work their way up from their starting point.*”

Recent research confirms the political importance of moral and religious convictions. In the research article “Mapping Moral Language on US Presidential Primary Campaigns Reveals Rhetorical Networks of Political Division and Unity,” the authors acknowledge the importance of personal convictions in American politics. They write, “Our approach uniquely reveals that just as moral convictions play a critical role in constructing the political attitudes of voters, moral language plays a critical role in connecting and differentiating political candidates and political parties during presidential elections in the United States.” In an increasingly polarized society, the messaging of political campaigns and candidates matters more than ever. Their research also emphasizes the differences in how the two parties utilize moral and religious language. They continue, “Democrats emphasizing careful and just treatment of individuals and Republicans emphasizing in-group loyalty and respect for social hierarchies.”²⁷

²⁶ Kreiss, D., Barker, J. O., & Zenner, S. (2017). *Trump Gave Them Hope: Studying the Strangers in Their Own Land*. *Political Communication*, 34(3), 470–478.

²⁷ Hackenburg, K., Brady, W. J., & Tsakiris, M. (2023). *Mapping Moral Language on US Presidential Primary Campaigns Reveals Rhetorical Networks of Political Division and Unity*. *PNAS Nexus*, 2(6).

“In an increasingly polarized society, the messaging of political campaigns and candidates matters more than ever.”

Although all of these values have biblical roots, rural voters appear to connect more with messages rooted in loyalty and authority. These align with their personal experiences and learned beliefs, making it more likely for them to connect with candidates that affirm and reflect their values. In the 2024 presidential election, neither Donald Trump nor Kamala Harris was comparable to rural voters. Kamala Harris earned a law degree and established herself as a well-respected attorney and politician in San Francisco. Donald Trump grew up in New York with a wealthy family and has made billions in his business endeavors. Neither of these candidates embodies the moral foundations presented in rural America. However, rural voters showed a strong preference for one candidate. Donald Trump was able to appeal to the identity of the white rural voter enough to win this demographic in a higher percentage than any other candidate, Republican or Democrat, ever before.

The role of religion adds another layer to the influence of moral judgments. While the United States maintains a separation of church and state, religion continues to shape political engagement. Religion plays a significant role in the lives of many Americans, so we can see aspects of religiosity bleed into democratic participation. Recent research suggests many Americans continue to prioritize religiosity in their political leaders. In 2024, data collected by the *Pew Research Center* shows that a large portion of Americans value religiosity in politicians. It explains, “The survey also finds that about half of U.S. adults say it’s ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ important to them to have a president who has strong religious beliefs, even if those beliefs are different from their own.”²⁸ Although presidential religiosity does not typically influence policy proposals, voters still seek moral alignment or other religious affiliations in their elected officials. So, these judgments are innate. Voters’ moral evaluations of candidates are closely tied to how well those candidates reflect the values that matter to them.

“While the United States maintains a separation of church and state, religion continues to shape political engagement.”

²⁸ Rotolo, C. (2024, March 15). *8 in 10 Americans Say Religion is Losing Influence in Public Life*. Pew Research Center.

Notably, the moral/religious values held by voters extend beyond their perception of candidates and into the policies they promote. Research indicates that rural voters are more likely to believe that government should reflect Christian values. Conservatives, and correspondingly rural populations, are more likely to agree that the Bible should have more influence on U.S. laws, that the Bible and the will of the people conflict, and that the United States should declare Christianity the official religion of the nation. Donald Trump has used language that corresponds with these beliefs. Religion is often the basis for determining what values should be represented in government. Again, in “Mapping Moral Language on US Presidential Primary Campaigns Reveals Rhetorical Networks of Political Division and Unity,” the authors expanded on the concept of moral judgments of presidential campaigns. They state, “...nearly 80% of the most similar ‘intra-foundation similarity’ relationships between Democratic candidates took place along moral foundations of care and fairness. Likewise, for Republicans, 59% of their most similar ‘intra-foundation similarity’ relationships took place along moral foundations of loyalty and authority.”²⁹ Conservative policies match best with the values of loyalty and authority. These views represent strength and power, something rural voters have been deprived of. As a result, we see higher rates of conservatism in rural communities. The strong correlation between rural communities and conservative affiliations reinforces the idea that moral foundations serve as a basis of democratic participation.

Overall, moral foundations can be considered the core of political decision-making. Moral foundations theory suggests that people weigh their values differently, including the differences observed in conservatives and liberals. However, there will always be inconsistencies in how voters judge morals. Political engagement is often driven more by moral resonance than ideological purity or consistent religiosity. Ultimately, we realize that democracy is not only centered on policy but is also deeply rooted in values and moral judgments.

“Conservatives, and correspondingly rural populations, are more likely to agree that the **Bible** should have more influence on **U.S. laws**, that the Bible and the will of the people conflict, and that the United States should declare **Christianity** the **official religion** of the nation.”

²⁹ Hackenburg, K., Brady, W. J., & Tsakiris, M. (2023). *Mapping Moral Language on US Presidential Primary Campaigns Reveals Rhetorical Networks of Political Division and Unity*.

4.3 Prioritization of Key Issues

Understanding how different populations respond to political campaigns is essential for analyzing shifts in political engagement. The key issues we see at the center of our state and federal elections are important in analyzing how the population is evolving. We can often see religious influences in many of the key issues that motivate rural and urban residents to vote. Several key issues affect rural and urban populations differently. We see the differences in these experiences at the polls. This section explores how different communities respond to the core policies of campaigns. To understand these differences, it is essential to consider the broader context in which American politics operates. In “Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States,” published by the *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Rachel Kleinfeld describes the current state of American politics. She writes, “American politicians are highly ideologically polarized. In other words, they believe in and vote for different sets of policies, with little overlap between them. This trend has grown in a steady, unpunctuated manner for decades.”³⁰ This widening divide sets the stage for different interpretations of American politics. This section will examine how policies on opposite sides of the political spectrum appeal to rural and urban voters in distinct ways.

“We can often see *religious influences* in many of the key issues that motivate *rural and urban residents* to vote. Several key issues affect rural and urban populations *differently*. ”

Traditionally conservative policies typically include support for smaller government, lower taxes, and less regulation of businesses. The core of these values comes from the idea that rural voters, historically Republican, have not seen many benefits from government interaction. Rural voters often feel that they are best equipped to handle their own issues, making minimal government interference a significant priority for them. Similarly, research indicates that experiencing hardship is associated with conservative values.

³⁰ Kleinfeld, R. (2023, September 5). *Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

“Rural voters often feel that they are best equipped to handle their own issues, making *minimal government interference* a *significant priority* for them.”

The authors of “The Social Bases of Rural-Urban Political Divides: Social Status, Work, and Sociocultural Beliefs” explain some sociocultural characteristics that align individuals with conservative policies. They allege, “Ethnographic work suggests that less-educated, working-class individuals may align with the Republican Party to reassert their status through conservative ideologies (Sherman 2009; Van Dyke and Soule 2002) or because hardships lead to values about conserving economic resources, which resonates more with Republican messaging (Prasad et al., 2016).”³¹ Another theory that explains why rural voters tend to vote Republican is that of self-employment. A good portion of rural voters are self-employed or own their own small businesses. Research suggests this could be another correlation. The authors continue, “Finally, self-employment tends to be associated with support for conservative policies and Republican candidates. This is due to political conservatism typically entailing support for smaller government, lower taxes, and less regulation of businesses, policies that are typically viewed as benefiting small-business owners.” Overall, conservative politics provide insight into the broader motivations behind rural voting behavior, beyond considerations of individual political candidates.

In contrast, liberal policies differ in both priorities and application. Cities and states with a democratic majority often enact socially and fiscally liberal policies. For a specific application, we can examine some examples of campaign promises that 2024 Democratic Presidential candidate Kamala Harris ran on to establish the direction the Democratic Party has taken. An important issue to many voters was abortion. Kamala Harris ran on a promise to eliminate the filibuster and restore *Roe v. Wade*, guaranteeing abortion is legal up until the 24th week, when the fetus becomes independently viable. Fiscally, Harris focused her policies on raising taxes for top earners and not increasing taxes for lower-income classes. Specifically, she promised not to raise taxes for any Americans making under \$400,000 a year. She proposed rolling back tax cuts for the wealthy, implementing a minimum tax for billionaires, and increasing the capital gains tax for those earning over \$ 1 million per year.

³¹ Kelly, P., & Lobao, L. (2018). *The Social Bases of Rural-Urban Political Divides: Social Status, Work, and Sociocultural Beliefs*. *Rural Sociology*, 84(4), 669–705.

Harris also proposed a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. She proposed universal background checks for gun sales.³² These are just a few examples of policies that Harris adopted during her campaign. These are historically liberal policies, endorsed by numerous other Democrats.

While political ideologies certainly influence voting behavior, many voters are also motivated by how well they feel that the current or past administrations have addressed their social and economic concerns. Rural areas have not seen auspicious results from any administration in the last few decades. Recent research suggests economic conditions in rural areas are not improving. The *Center on Rural Innovation* published an analysis of the rural economy over time in “The Equity of Economic Opportunity in Rural America.” The research reads, “These are patterns of economic disparity that we can see repeating and amplifying over time: By December 2022, 63% of rural counties had fewer jobs than they did before the Great Recession in August 2007, while non-rural counties had both recovered and exceeded their pre-recession employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics).”

“While *political ideologies* certainly influence *voting behavior*, many voters are also motivated by *how well they feel* that the current or past administrations have addressed their *social and economic concerns*.”

Furthermore, rural communities are not at fault. Again, from the *Center on Rural Innovation*, “This didn’t happen because people in rural areas aren’t trying hard enough or aren’t smart enough. Rather, it’s because some policies and biases have concentrated resources and investment elsewhere, making it harder for rural areas to compete.”³³ Rural voters were not pleased with the past four years, and this is evident in their overwhelming decision to vote for Donald Trump. So, although not all rural voters may have agreed with some of Trump’s more conservative policies, they were able to overlook this in an attempt to achieve a more prosperous new term/future.

³² Jacobson, L. (2024, September 30). *Harris’ 2024 Campaign Promises: A Running List*. PolitiFact.

³³ Danforth, A. (2024, January 12). *The Equity of Economic Opportunity in Rural America*. Center on Rural Innovation.

An interesting counterargument to this topic is to examine evidence that some policies from the Democratic Party were actually beneficial for rural communities. A common belief among rural residents is that the Democratic Party is the party of elites; however, some policies crafted by a Democratic administration were explicitly designed to help rural communities. An opinion article by David Corn, a political journalist, titled “Are White Rural Americans the Real Threat to Democracy?,” outlines some policies that policymakers specially crafted to serve rural communities. Corn writes,

“And then Biden comes into office, and the COVID vaccine goes online in early 2021. Biden knows that because of all the conspiracies—George Soros, tracking chips—rural white people are the least likely to get vaccinated. He creates a program and puts millions of dollars behind it. He uses faith-based rural organizations and farm-related organizations with local credibility, like the National Milk Producers Federation, and they promote the message that these vaccines are safe and that you can save yourself, your family, and your parents. It’s a huge success.”³⁴

This brings about two different possibilities. First, rural voters are not as forgotten as they may seem. The Biden administration specifically created this initiative to help rural communities combat the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests that the Democratic Party does, in fact, focus on rural communities. Additionally, this suggests that the Democratic Party may not prioritize aspects of life that are important to rural voters.

Although there are examples of Democratic policies aimed at helping rural communities, this does not guarantee that rural voters will appreciate these efforts. Nonetheless, the example of Joe Biden’s efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that although most rural voters do not show their support for the Democratic Party at the polls, neither party is strictly dedicated to serving one subsection of America. Instead, paying closer attention to initiatives and policies can help inform voters.

Nonetheless, the example of Joe Biden’s efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that neither party is strictly dedicated to serving one community type. Instead, proper analysis requires paying closer attention to initiatives and policies from both sides.

³⁴ Corn, D. (2024, March 5). *Are White Rural Americans the Real Threat to Democracy?*

“The Biden administration specifically created [an] initiative to help rural communities combat the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests that the *Democratic Party* does, in fact, *focus on rural communities*.”

4.4 Attitudes Towards Governance

Attitudes towards governance can differ significantly between rural and urban areas. It is inherent that voters are often heavily influenced by their perceptions of the government. We often find that social, economic, and religious influences shape how individuals perceive governance. Historically, rural areas tend to shy away from government overreach.

First, we can examine social factors that influence attitudes towards governance. The article “New Study: Rural Americans Trust Government Less, No Matter Who’s President” by Eric Dolan analyzes a new study published by *American Politics Research*. The study examines the rural-urban political divide, with a particular focus on distrust in the government. In the study, Dolan writes, “...rural areas have been strongholds for anti-establishment politics, particularly under Donald Trump’s leadership, which often centered on skepticism of government and elites.”³⁵ Although many Republican voters found allegiance in Donald Trump’s campaign, it is clear that this allegiance has its conditions over time. It is more likely that rural voters chose the best option they thought available, but not what they truly believed in.

As we examined earlier in Section 2.1, rural distrust extends beyond party lines. The same distrust exists under Republican administrations, as under Democratic administrations. Distrust is not a problem specific to one party, as evidenced by patterns that have persisted across multiple presidential administrations.

“We often find that *social, economic, and religious influences* shape how individuals perceive *governance*. Historically, *rural areas* tend to shy away from *government overreach*.”

³⁵ Dolan, E. W. (2024, October 23). *New Study: Rural Americans Trust Government Less, No Matter Who’s President*.

Again from “Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence: What the Research Says”, the authors analyze the role distrust in the government can play at the polls. “The affective polarization conversation misses the reality that a portion of angry, low-trust Americans do not simply dislike the other party but distrust nearly every institution in American life: big business, schools, newspapers, television news, Congress, the criminal justice system, and organized religion, among others.”³⁶ The government plays a significant role in American life. Nearly every institution serving rural communities is operated by the government; thus, every failure of these institutions fosters distrust among citizens.

“Nearly every institution serving rural communities is operated by the government; thus, every failure of these institutions fosters distrust among citizens.”

Alongside general social distrust, economic hardship plays a crucial role in shaping rural attitudes toward the government. Rural constituents have experienced an economic decline that is unique to their community. They have not seen any upward trends in a long time, paired with a lack of response from either of the two major political parties. Policymakers have introduced several environmental initiatives in rural America.

However, many rural residents often perceive these efforts differently, leading to a common misunderstanding of policy priorities. Again, from “Religion, Politics, and the Environment in Rural America,” the authors analyze the role of new policy in rural America. They write, “They may perceive environmental initiatives as the source of, rather than a response to, the economic decline in their communities. On the other hand, it may also be the case that disenchanting rural Americans in declining communities turn to born-again Christianity as a way to cope with their community’s economic decline; being born-again may provide an anchor amidst dwindling community resources.”³⁷

³⁶ Kleinfeld, R. (2023, September 5). *Polarization, Democracy, and Political Violence in the United States*.

³⁷ Dillon, M., & Henly, M. (2008). *Religion, Politics, and the Environment in Rural America*.

Once more, many rural constituents have lost hope in either party to be able to restore the economic flourish they once had in their communities. This economic disillusionment fuels not only political frustration but also a sense of isolation that prompts rural voters to seek relief in other ways, often through increased religious participation. Economic decline has become more than a policy issue for rural Americans; it is a reality that reaffirms the broader social distrust in governance and American politics.

“..., many *rural constituents* have *lost hope* in *either party* to be able to restore the *economic flourish* they once had in their communities.”

Religion remains one of the most enduring aspects of rural identity. Often, when the government fails to provide adequate services, churches step in to fill the community's needs. In many rural communities where schools, hospitals, and businesses have closed, churches remain essential for civic life. The *Center for Rural Engagement* at Indiana University Bloomington published “Don’t fight the tide-The church as the rural resource hub” to explain how churches have taken a larger role in rural America. Denny Spinner writes, “While other institutions disappear, churches hold a critical place in rural America. In rural America, churches are many times the last institution standing, the center of civic life, and a trusted resource.” This is especially true when the government appears to be absent. Churches can offer more than spiritual support; they can also serve as a hub for connecting with broader community resources. Spinner continues, “We should recognize the church as an important partner in connecting communities with resources they need — healthcare to housing. Pastors are on the front lines. They know their neighbors and the struggles they face.” For many rural voters, trust in the church is much stronger than trust in any level of government. Spinner concludes, “That trust is hard to come by; they don’t believe the government, popular culture, or even law enforcement care about them or their problems. But they trust the church.”³⁸ In the absence of effective governance, many rural communities see churches stepping up to provide community support. This creates a unique dynamic in which faith and politics are especially intertwined, further shaping how rural communities engage with democracy.

³⁸ Spinner, D. (2025, March 25). *Opinion: Don’t Fight the Tide-The Church as the Rural Resource Hub*. Center for Rural Engagement, Indiana University Bloomington.

“For many *rural voters*, *trust in the church* is much stronger than trust in any level of *government*.”

4.5 Cultural and Spiritual Foundations of Political Behavior

Religion and politics have long been intertwined in American life, shaping individual identities and collective decisions at the polls. Rural and urban populations operate under different cultural and spiritual foundations. To understand these divides, we must first consider how religion impacts values, morality, and civic participation. Published in the *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, Dr. M.N. Murthy wrote “The Impact of Cultural Factors on Political Participation and Activism” to analyze the role cultural norms play in political participation. “Religious teachings, beliefs, and institutions shape individuals’ values, moral perspectives, and views on justice, governance, and civic duty. Religion can act as both a motivator for political activism and a constraint on political engagement.”³⁹ Many voters form their values and beliefs based on their religious affiliations, which in turn influences their voting behavior. The foundational influence helps explain why religious affiliation can often predict political behavior.

Religion not only shapes individual values but also plays a strategic role in modern political campaigning. Political candidates prioritize religious affiliation. Although the United States operates under a secular government, candidates still appeal to religious values to win votes. Additionally, as noted by Dr. M.N. Murthy in “*The Role of Religion in Shaping Political Beliefs and Practices*,” religion can have a direct and indirect influence on voters. Dr. Murthy writes, “Religious ethics also impact political decision-making beyond the realm of law. Politicians often appeal to religious values to gain support and legitimize their policies. For example, politicians in the U.S. frequently use religious rhetoric in their speeches and campaigns to connect with religious voters and frame their policies in moral terms.”⁴⁰ The legitimization by political candidates is a heavy influence on voters. Rhetoric that likens political beliefs to religious ideals adds pressure to voters to conform their beliefs to match their religion, even though both religion and politics can coexist independently without conflicting with one another.

³⁹ Murthy, M. N. (2018). *The Impact of Cultural Factors on Political Participation and Activism*. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, 5(4).

⁴⁰ Murthy, M. N. (2016). *The Role of Religion in Shaping Political Beliefs and Practices*. *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, 3(2).

“Many voters form their **values** and **beliefs** based on their **religious affiliations**, which in turn influences their **voting behavior**.”

Political candidates do not just use religion to connect with religious voters; they also rely on it to shape narratives and create moral connections to political issues. Even in secular societies like the United States, religious values often find themselves entangled in political debates. Despite the secularization of government, topics like prayer in schools, abortion, and same-sex marriage often involve conversations of religious ethics. Rural voters are fully immersed in a more traditional, conservative lifestyle. They often live separated from those who are different from them. As a result, most views held in rural communities remain consistent. They are not exposed to experiences or individuals who may alter their views or offer a different perspective. The values they develop, often through religion, tend to stick with them. In rural America, religion does not just form personal beliefs. It defines social norms and political views, reinforcing the connections between religious participation and political engagement. Despite secularization, religion remains deeply embedded in American politics. Religion is a significant part of life for many voters, and its impact is evident in numerous ways. Many voters, particularly in rural communities, continue to draw on religious frameworks to inform their political interpretations.

According to the PRRI’s “Analyzing the 2024 Presidential Election,” researchers found that religious beliefs significantly influenced voting behavior in this election. The research finds, “Just one in four voters (25%) agree with the idea that ‘God ordained Donald Trump to be the winner of the 2024 presidential election.’ ” That 25% is a large portion of voters who view politics through a religious lens. Individuals who hold this belief and other similar beliefs are not divided by other demographic indicators, unlike many political beliefs. The PRRI also discovers, “White evangelical Protestants (60%) are the religious voters most likely to agree that Trump was divinely ordained to win, followed by Hispanic Protestants (45%).”⁴¹ Such beliefs transcend traditional demographic boundaries, such as race, highlighting the influence of faith in shaping political beliefs. These religious beliefs have a profound impact on how believers perceive and engage with politics. American democracy and religion are two profoundly held beliefs, and it is difficult to separate them.

⁴¹ Public Religion Research Institute. (2024, December 13). *Analyzing the 2024 Presidential Vote: PRRI’s Post-Election Survey*. PRRI.

“Even in *secular societies* like the *United States*, *religious values* often find themselves *entangled in political debates*.”

While rural voters often hold traditional interpretations of religion, urban voters hold different cultural experiences that shape how they apply religion to political behavior. They have a different social identity from rural voters. Urban communities are typically more diverse than rural communities. Racial, cultural, and ideological differences give rise to a diverse range of political expressions. Urban residents are surrounded by diversity every day and are exposed to differences, making them more primed for social and political change. This diversity fosters exposure, allowing for more flexible moral frameworks. Similarly, when Democrats do use their faith to base their votes on, they prioritize different values than rural Republican voters. Values inform our political beliefs, but we often pick and choose which values are most important to us. Liberals are more likely to identify with the value of care/preventing harm. With liberal policies, we often see emphasis on these ideas. Social welfare, prison reform, and equality are initiatives often involved in liberal policies. Kindness, compassion, and generosity are also values often found in Christian, Jewish, and Islamic teachings. Urban voters are much more likely to use these values to inform their beliefs. Combined with increased diverse experiences, religious urban voters are still much more likely to vote liberally.

“...when *Democrats* do use their *faith* to base their votes on, they *prioritize different values* than *rural Republican voters*.”

5. Comparisons of Community Well-Being

5.1 Economic Stability

Economic stability is a factor that can impact democratic participation. Rural and urban communities experience economic instability and prosperity in distinct ways. These differences provide a different perspective to each voter. These unique perspectives, paired with religious values, morals, and beliefs, are the key to understanding why democratic participation varies across community types. Understanding the difference in economic conditions helps explain the broader context in which political attitudes and behaviors develop.

A significant issue in rural communities is that they often lack the same level of prosperity as urban communities. We can find an example in the first four years after the 2008 recession. Counties with fewer than 100,000 residents lost 17,500 businesses. In contrast, counties with more than 1 million residents added 99,000 new businesses. It is not the entire country facing economic hardship; cities are still booming with growth. That growth seems to have left rural communities behind. Another revealing comparison is in wages. The *Pew Research Center* published an article in 2018 titled “What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities” to analyze differences among community types. The research finds, “The average earnings per worker in urban areas were \$49,515 in 2016, followed by \$46,081 in the suburbs and \$35,171 in rural areas.”⁴²

While these figures do not account for differences in cost of living, they clearly highlight the economic disadvantage facing rural communities. This growing economic divide feeds into broader feelings of exclusion and neglect among rural voters. Adding to these challenges, rural communities face a unique set of challenges because they often lack access to the same community resources as urban communities. Although both rural and urban areas face similar economic challenges, including high unemployment rates, housing issues, and workforce shortages, rural citizens are often geographically farther from support designed to help them. For example, rural communities are often separated from educational opportunities, vocational training, and unemployment agencies.

This limited access can exacerbate economic instability and deepen feelings of isolation. Consequently, rural residents may turn to alternative sources for comfort, such as religion, to fill the gaps left by poor economic conditions. With this information, we can establish connections between the roles of religion and politics in today’s world. Rural voters, who often feel left behind by America’s political system, may become disillusioned with both major parties. Even under Republican leadership, the party that often claims to represent rural interests, distrust in the government’s ability to increase economic growth remains high. The lack of faith in political institutions can lead to an increased reliance on religion. Religion offers a sense of identity, stability, and purpose that rural residents may lack due to their disillusionment with politics and the broader social landscape. In this way, economic and political disenfranchisement reinforces the social foundations that shape rural democratic participation.

⁴² Parker, K. (2018, May 22). *What Unites and Divides Urban, Suburban and Rural Communities*. Pew Research Center.

“Although both *rural and urban areas* face *similar economic challenges*, including high unemployment rates, housing issues, and workforce shortages, *rural citizens* are often *geographically farther* from support designed to help them.”

5.2 Healthcare Access

Healthcare access is not just a matter of physical well-being; it is also a matter of social well-being. Healthcare is deeply intertwined with community stability and political engagement. Rural and urban communities face similar issues with the healthcare system. The problems faced by a community, or the lack thereof, can reveal the success of policy in certain areas. Also, we can draw connections with the role faith-based organizations play in healthcare. By combining these two ideas, we can establish connections between healthcare and politics. Research has shown that rural residents are more likely to experience health problems than urban residents. Rural citizens experience higher rates of diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, obesity, and hypertension than urban citizens do. These health disparities not only impact daily life but also affect the ability of rural citizens to participate in the democratic process, especially when it comes to accessing polling places or participating in political events. Furthermore, rural residents are more likely to be dependent on public health programs like Medicare or Medicaid, and are more likely to be completely uninsured. These challenges highlight the close integration of healthcare into community well-being. As a result, healthcare access becomes not only a public health issue, but a form of civic disenfranchisement for many rural Americans.

Given the lack of infrastructure and lingering distrust in government institutions, other organizations often step in to fill healthcare gaps in rural areas. Faith-based organizations, or FBOs, can play a crucial role in addressing the distrust and limited resources in rural areas. For example, we can look at the COVID-19 pandemic a few years ago, a significant health crisis that swept across both rural and urban America. We can look back to the example of President Biden launching a targeted vaccine outreach initiative that specifically benefited rural America. Biden used FBOs as an extension of the government.⁴³

⁴³ Corn, D. (2024, March 5). *Are White Rural Americans the Real Threat to Democracy?*

“...rural residents are more likely to be dependent on public health programs like Medicare or Medicaid, and are more likely to be completely uninsured.”

This is not the only example of FBOs being used to benefit healthcare in rural communities. FBOs operate under the social ecological model, addressing personal, interpersonal, organizational, and community factors to provide services to individuals who would otherwise not have access to them. Through their cultural alignment, FBOs not only meet healthcare needs but also provide a safe community for rural individuals to come together and connect. While rural communities benefit from strong FBO networks, urban areas often face similarly poor environments and complex challenges. Low-income and often non-white neighborhoods in urban areas also face a lack of affordable healthcare, but FBOs are much less common in urban communities. Instead, secular nonprofits and community organizations serve as the primary sources of healthcare support when the government fails to provide other affordable options. These groups are typically formed around cultural identities, rather than religion, to reflect the diversity of many urban communities. Because it is almost impossible to appeal to the entire community through a single faith, urban healthcare organizations must take a more holistic approach. The distinctions we observe in rural and urban communities regarding non-governmental organizations reflect the differences in religious affiliation within these communities.

Religion plays distinct roles in the lives of these residents, as evident in the presence or absence of religion in healthcare settings. When people lack reliable access to healthcare, their ability to engage in democracy is often diminished. Poor health, limited resources, and distrust in democratic institutions can all serve as barriers to political engagement. However, when communities have strong support systems, such as those provided by FBOs or other culture-based nonprofits, residents are better positioned to overcome those barriers. These organizations not only provide essential healthcare services but also empower residents to participate in their communities. Ultimately, healthcare access is not only a moral or medical necessity in current society. Healthcare-centered organizations can inform us about how religion, culture, and politics influence voters' lives.

“Low-income and often non-white neighborhoods in urban areas also face a lack of affordable healthcare, but FBOs [faith-based organizations] are much less common in urban communities.”

“A key driver of the *strong social connections* in *rural areas* is the *presence of religion*.”

5.3 Social Cohesion

Social cohesion plays a vital role in shaping political and social dynamics within communities. Rural and urban communities interact with their neighbors in distinct ways, leading to different associations and relationships with them. We can look at differences in how rural and urban communities remain connected as a measure of community well-being. Social cohesion can be a measure of community success as it demonstrates common goals, values, or morals in a particular group. Rural communities uniquely have higher rates of social cohesion compared to urban communities. Researchers measure social cohesion in several ways, but all methods involve some degree of trust among individuals. Again in “Religion, Politics and the Environment in Rural America,” the authors note, “...large majorities across these groups—close to 9 out of 10—agree that the community would bind together to work on some local problem, that people in the community are willing to help their neighbors, and that people in the community trust and get along with one another.”⁴⁴ In most areas of this study, results show that rural communities demonstrate significantly higher levels of social cohesion. A key driver of the strong social connections in rural areas is the presence of religion. In many rural communities, religion serves as a unifying force.

Neighbors are brought together by their shared values. Religion is just another form of collective identity. Earlier, we discussed rural identity and its impact on voting behavior. Rural residents already share similar feelings of abandonment and despair, but are also joined together in their religious beliefs. These connections are not even limited to religious affiliation. We also observe connections between higher church attendance and greater trust in one’s neighbors. One notable statistic is that individuals who attend a religious gathering at least once a month are more likely to have trust in their neighbors.⁴⁵ This raises an interesting conversation about the connections between religion and social cohesion. We see many ways in which churches serve as a connection for rural residents. Religion binds rural communities together, reinforcing shared trust and cooperation.

⁴⁴ Dillon, M., & Henly, M. (2008). Religion, Politics, and the Environment in Rural America.

⁴⁵ Silver, L. (2025, May 8). *How Connected Do Americans Feel to Their Neighbors?* Pew Research Center.

While social cohesion provides strength and solidarity to communities, it can also lead to unintended consequences, including political stagnation and resistance to change. The close relationships found in rural communities exhibit a type of solidarity that urban communities often lack. The shared experiences and limited opportunities to explore diversity are why we often see a lack of progress in deep-red rural communities. Rural communities have been trending red for a long time, and the rightward shift after the 2024 presidential election suggests that districts could continue to become redder. A lack of diversity in rural communities can similarly hurt well-being. For individuals who do not fit in with their neighbors, they might have negative experiences regarding their communities. Thus, while unity in rural areas fosters trust and cooperation, it may also contribute to an echo chamber that discourages diversity and hinders progress.

“Rural communities have been trending red for a long time, and the rightward shift after the 2024 presidential election suggests that districts could continue to become redder.”

In contrast to the homogeneity of rural areas, urban communities are defined by their diversity. Diversity in urban communities can either be a challenge or an enriching factor in social cohesion. In some cases, we observe that social cohesion is often limited in urban areas due to the diverse experiences of residents. Urban areas exhibit diversity in numerous demographics, including socioeconomic class, race, age, sexual orientation, and more. For some residents, forming relationships or connections with others can be challenging when they have little in common with one another. Research indicates that neighborhoods with high population densities tend to have lower social cohesion. An article titled “Built Environment, Urban Vitality and Social Cohesion: Do Vibrant Neighborhoods Foster Strong Communities?” published in *Landscape and Urban Planning*, the authors find that urban areas have lower social cohesion. They write, “The finding that denser neighborhoods have lower social cohesion is consistent with previous empirical studies.”⁴⁶ Despite some of these challenges that come with diversity, there are still examples of strong community ties formed through shared cultural and religious identity in urban communities. Urban areas do not suffer from a complete lack of social cohesion.

⁴⁶ Mouratidis, K., & Poortinga, W. (2020). *Built Environment, Urban Vitality and Social Cohesion: Do Vibrant Neighborhoods Foster Strong Communities?* *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 204, 103951.

Black Protestant churches and Latino Catholic churches maintain strong community ties, exemplifying how religion can bring people together, even in diverse neighborhoods. Even in the complexity of urban life, religious institutions can foster meaningful cohesion among residents, demonstrating that shared values can still thrive amidst diversity.

“Despite some of [*the*] challenges that come with diversity, there are still examples of *strong community ties* formed through shared *cultural and religious identity* in urban communities.”

6. Other Forms of Political Engagement

6.1 Legislative Advocacy

In a representative democracy, the voice of the people is expressed not only through voting but also through ongoing engagement with the democratic process. Legislative advocacy plays a significant role in constituent-policymaker interaction and is profoundly important in a representative democracy. Exploring the relationship between rural and urban advocacy, as well as the intersection of religious and non-religious advocacy, is crucial to understanding political engagement in modern America. Advocacy is used to help Congress or the executive branch understand an issue, with a focus on education or public recommendations. Although voters usually vote for candidates who share a majority of their views, advocacy is important in holding legislators accountable.

Advocacy is often a means of bringing concerns to the attention of legislators and ensuring that the community’s needs are being addressed. In this way, advocacy acts as a crucial bridge between communities and their representatives. Rural communities face distinct political challenges that require a tailored approach to advocacy.

“Although voters usually vote for candidates who share a majority of their views, *advocacy* is important in holding legislators *accountable*.”

Rural advocacy programs, similar to urban advocacy programs, often provide public information resources, policymaker education and engagement, and a network for advocacy, allowing organizations to come together. They target key issues like education and workforce programs, infrastructure, business and economic development, and health policy. These needs differ from those in urban areas. Due to the unique nature of rural development, advocacy is often essential in bringing rural priorities into the legislative spotlight. It often takes a while for legislation to catch up to the modern problems faced in rural America, and legislative advocacy provides the opportunity to advocate directly for what your community needs. In the article “Impact of Advocacy on Legislation: Shaping Legal Outcomes,” we gain insight into the relationship between advocacy and legislation. The authors write, “Effective advocacy often leads to the introduction of new laws, regulatory changes, and the modification of existing legislation.”⁴⁷ Ultimately, rural advocacy plays a vital role in ensuring that rural communities are not left behind by the government, providing a means to advocate for long-term policy solutions.

Despite the clear benefits of rural advocacy, there are real challenges that hinder grassroots advocacy in these areas. Rural communities face unique issues that hinder some from effecting change through advocacy. Although community trust is high in rural communities, this does not guarantee residents are connected enough with their neighbors to see the long-term issues plaguing their communities. It can be difficult for preoccupied voters not only to see the bigger picture issues caused by legislation, but also to organize among themselves to advocate. This is where external support becomes crucial. Outside organizations are often responsible for advocacy on behalf of rural residents. These organizations often possess better resources that are more equipped to handle governmental affairs than citizens on their own. These organizations play a crucial role in uniting residents and driving long-term change through policy.

In the absence of civic institutions and nonprofit organizations, churches and FBOs play a crucial role in advocacy within disadvantaged communities. Advocacy is the process of raising your own voice, often for the greater good of the community. Faith-based organizations often play a significant role in this, especially in rural communities where there may be limited funding or democratic participation among residents. These organizations often fill critical gaps by educating, connecting, and mobilizing individuals for policy action.

⁴⁷ Editorial. (2024, July 31). *The Impact of Advocacy on Legislation: Shaping Legal Outcomes*. Legislative Advocacy, Laws Learned.

“*Advocacy* is the process of raising your own voice, often for the *greater good* of the community. [*FBOs*] often play a significant role in this, especially in *rural communities* where there may be *limited funding or democratic participation* among residents.”

First, they focus on educating residents and attendees on local, state, and federal legislative issues. Especially in rural communities where access to resources and information is limited, it can be challenging for residents to understand how governmental procedures affect them. Churches provide safe spaces for individuals to learn about issues that affect them without judgment or condemnation. Churches also help residents build connections with lawmakers to help positively influence their decisions. Moreover, finally, churches can encourage participation within government. They often take important steps towards mobilizing congregation members to work towards the change they want to see. Faith-based institutions serve as powerful advocates, not only for spiritual needs but also for political empowerment and social justice.

As we shift our focus to urban communities, we see a different landscape of advocacy. Urban advocacy can often be complicated by diversity, high population density, and social fragmentation. A specific challenge that urban areas face is a lack of overall social cohesion. In some very diverse communities, it can be challenging to come together to advocate for mutually beneficial change. Politics can be highly polarizing in certain situations, making it challenging to advocate effectively for one’s views. Despite these challenges, advocacy in urban spaces remains a powerful tool for political reform. Another quote from “The Impact of Advocacy on Legislation: Shaping Legal Outcomes” highlights this idea. The article reads, “The results of advocacy initiatives can have broad implications, including heightened public awareness and increased civic engagement. By fostering dialogue around specific issues, advocacy paves the way for legislative reforms that reflect the collective interests and needs of the populace.”⁴⁸ Even in the face of division, advocacy enables urban residents to find common ground and influence policies that benefit their communities.

⁴⁸ Editorial. (2024, July 31). *The Impact of Advocacy on Legislation: Shaping Legal Outcomes*.

“*Politics* can be highly *polarizing* in certain situations, making it challenging to advocate effectively for one’s views.”

6.2 Lobbying

In American democracy, lobbying plays a critical role in shaping public policy. While lobbying is often associated with corporate or urban interests, lobbying is equally significant in rural areas, where it represents a unique set of concerns. From “The Ethics of Writing About Lobbyists,” we can find a proper definition of modern political lobbying. The article reads, “In politics, lobbying, persuasion, or interest representation is the act of lawfully attempting to influence the actions, policies, or decisions of government officials, most often legislators or members of regulatory agencies.”⁴⁹ Lobbying differs from legislative advocacy in that it often targets specific legislation to either encourage or discourage its passage. Lobbying is often limited by government regulation, whether through funding limitations or classifications such as profit/nonprofit status. We can examine the role of FBOs in rural communities and their influence on lobbying in government. Rural lobbyists have the unique responsibility of balancing the interests of both rural and urban areas. Agriculture is a significant part of rural life.

Rural agriculture is utilized in urban communities, meaning both groups have interests in the intersection of agriculture and government. In these situations, it is a lobbyist’s job to help the legislators understand what happens in agriculture and how the decisions they make affect everyone who produces our food, fiber, and fuel. Another significant component of interest representation in American politics is religious lobbying. Religious groups, both interfaith and single-faith, actively engage in advocacy work at different levels of government. The *Pew Research Center* conducted a 2011 study on active lobbying groups in America. About one-quarter of the groups studied either represent multiple faiths or advocate on religious issues without representing a specific religion.⁵⁰ Interestingly, the growth in the number of religion-related advocacy organizations appears to have kept pace with, or even exceeded, the growth in some other common types of advocacy organizations. These organizations are not only increasing in number but also expanding the range of issues they address.

⁴⁹ Stuart, G. (2022, December 6). *The Ethics of Writing About Lobbyists*. The Ethics of Writing.

⁵⁰ Lugo, L., Cooperman, A., O’Connell, E., & Stencel, S. (2011, November 21). *Lobbying for the Faithful*. Pew Research Center.

“Lobbying differs from legislative advocacy in that it often targets specific legislation to either encourage or discourage its passage.”

Additionally, the 2011 *Pew Research Center* study revealed interesting data about the issues FBOs lobby for. Domestically, the most commonly addressed issues are the relationship between church and state, the defense of civil rights and liberties for religious and other minorities, bioethics and life issues (such as abortion, capital punishment, and end-of-life issues), and family/marriage issues (such as the definition of marriage, domestic violence, and fatherhood initiatives). Internationally, the most commonly addressed concerns include human rights, debt relief, and other economic issues, as well as the promotion of peace and democracy.⁵¹ Overall, religious lobbying organizations, whether rooted in faith or inspired by moral values, play a vital role in influencing policy.

Urban interest groups often play a significant role in advocating for urban communities. The high population density in urban communities presents specific challenges that urban interest groups address. These groups often play a prominent role in advocating for the unique needs of urban America. The primary concern with urban interest groups is that they may only serve the wealthiest individuals, thereby perpetuating elitism and distrust in the government. We can examine an example published by the *Boston Urban Study Group* in 1984 of an urban interest group called Vault. Vault was comprised of white, male business leaders who seemingly exerted extraordinary influence over Boston during their tenure. However, there were still some issues with the way this urban interest group met its goals. The article “Power and Interest Groups in City Politics,” published by the *Kennedy School of Government* at Harvard University, cites this as an example. The authors conclude, “Sadly, in accomplishing this elite’s goals, as well as carrying out their own view of progress, city leaders ran roughshod over neighborhoods, sometimes literally destroying what stood in the way (O’Connor, 1993; Gans, 1982).”⁵² Urban communities offer significantly more opportunities compared to rural communities, so it is essential to consider how harmful intentions may impact the community through various lobbying groups.

⁵¹ Lugo, L., Cooperman, A., O’Connell, E., & Stencel, S. (2011, November 21). *Lobbying for the Faithful*.

⁵² Berry, J. M., Portney, K. E., Liss, R., Simoncelli, J., & Berger, L. (2006, December). *Power and Interest Groups in City Politics*. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

6.3 Public Protests

One vital aspect of American democracy is the role of public protest. As a form of political engagement, protesting has long been a central component of social movements that have shaped our nation's values. It is interesting to explore the relationship between rural and urban protests and their impact on social change.

What makes protesting uniquely significant is that it is not limited to influencing public policy; it often affects public opinion and collective identity. The role of protests in the political process is outlined in "Do Political Protests Matter? Evidence from the Tea Party Movement," published by the *Quarterly Journal of Economics*. The article states, "...protests can build political movements that ultimately affect policy making, and that they do so by influencing political views rather than solely through the revelation of existing political preferences."⁵³

In rural communities, however, various cultural and religious factors can complicate this form of political engagement. A quote from Dr. M.N. Murthy's paper "The Impact of Cultural Factors on Political Participation and Activism" describes this well. Dr. Murthy writes, "In many conservative religious cultures, political activism, particularly forms that involve public protest or civil disobedience, may be viewed with suspicion or outright disapproval." This issue is not limited to the United States; similar examples can also be seen in other countries. Dr. Murthy continues, "For example, in some Islamic societies, religious authorities may discourage political protests, especially if they believe such actions threaten social order or contravene religious teachings."⁵⁴

“ ‘..., in some Islamic societies, *religious authorities* may *discourage political protests*, especially if they believe such actions *threaten social order* or *contravene religious teachings*.’ ”

⁵³ Madestam, A., Shoag, D., Veuger, S., & Yanagizawa-Drott, D. (2013). *Do Political Protests Matter? Evidence from the Tea Party Movement*. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 128(4), 1633–1685.

⁵⁴ Murthy, M. N. (2018). *The Impact of Cultural Factors on Political Participation and Activism*. International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews, 5(4).

Despite this, theologians have long acknowledged the intersection of faith and justice. Many scholars would agree that public protest is an example of moral testimony promoted by many religions. An opinion article titled “Worship as Protest; Protest as Worship” by advocacy director Jimmie Hawkins agrees with this. Hawkins writes, “Theologians have long affirmed a connection between faith and justice advocacy, even as it relates to protest. The Latin word *protestar* means ‘to declare a public testimony, to bear witness.’”⁵⁵

This more profound meaning of protest helps explain its relevance in American politics. Understanding the challenges that come with rural protest can help us examine some barriers to political engagement. Nonetheless, there are clear examples where rural protest has significantly influenced American politics. A notable example is the *Tea Party* movement, which emerged in 2009. The *Tea Party*’s Tax Day rallies included over 500 protests across the United States on April 15, 2009, including many small towns and rural communities. Research into the implications of these protests revealed that participation in protests had a significant impact on political engagement. In Chapter 5 of the book “Making Politics Work for Development,” we see data that demonstrates the role of protest in democracy. The chapter cites, “...the size of the protest led to more campaign contributions and changes in voting behavior and policy stances of incumbent politicians.”⁵⁶ This suggests that even brief, decentralized rural protests can have lasting political effects. Other contemporary examples include the *No Kings* protests. The *No Kings* movement emerged recently in response to concerns about government overreach and the perceived violation of individual liberties. This movement was unique in that smaller, traditionally conservative communities participated in these protests, a phenomenon that is not often seen. Rural communities demonstrated their ability to unify and spark social change. So while rural protest faces unique cultural and infrastructural challenges, it remains vital to shaping American politics.

“ ‘..., the size of the [*Tea Party*] protest led to *more campaign contributions and changes in voting behavior and policy stances of incumbent politicians.*’ ”

⁵⁵ Hawkins, J. (2024, December 11). *Worship as Protest; Protest as Worship*. Call to Worship.

⁵⁶ Khemani, S. (2016, May 25). *Evidence on the Impact of Political Engagement*. In *Making Politics Work for Development: Harnessing Transparency and Citizen Engagement*. World Bank, (5).

7. Conclusion

Religion plays an indispensable role in American politics. We find connections between political life and religiosity in many different situations. During my research, I collected information on the demographics of both rural and urban areas. I discovered a few fascinating phenomena that can inform us about the relationships citizens have with politics. Rural citizens have a strong sense of rural identity, closely tied to their geographical location. Rural residents are connected to their community through shared experiences, hardships, and reactions to change (or the lack thereof). Rural residents are also connected to their neighbors through shared religious beliefs.

“Rural residents are connected to their community through shared experiences, hardships, and reactions to change (or the lack thereof), ...[who are] are also connected to their neighbors through shared religious beliefs.”

Rural communities are predominantly Christian; while some rural areas in the United States have high diversity, many more communities are strictly homogeneous in almost every demographic. Thus, rural communities often struggle to handle change effectively. Rural communities continue to vote traditionally conservative, with trends showing the rural vote is only turning more red. However, there is no doubt that rural voters hold a large amount of power in our elections. The 2024 election showed us that rural communities voted for Republican candidate Donald Trump at higher rates than in any previous election. It was groundbreaking in that Donald Trump was able to secure a large portion of rural Christian voters; not only this, but Donald Trump also broke traditional racial divides in this election, winning larger shares of Black and Latino voters. My research into this trend highlights the growing importance of rural, religious voters in American democracy. Urban voters also have a unique role in American democracy. A large myth I have seen is that there is a lack of religiosity in urban areas. This is not the case; even urban areas have similar rates of religiosity to the national averages. However, when considering the connections between religiosity and political behavior, the diversity of urban areas is a crucial factor that needs to be taken into account. Urban areas are more diverse in almost every demographic when compared to rural areas. The diversity of religions and other demographics, such as race, age, and gender, can influence how citizens interact with their community. The diversity in urban areas automatically comes with a different set of experiences. Typically, we can observe this in more liberal social attitudes.

“...when considering the connections between *religiosity* and *political behavior*, the *diversity of urban areas* is a crucial factor that needs to be taken into account.”

However, we cannot ignore the stark rightward shift seen in urban areas during the 2024 presidential election. Many urban residents abandoned previous political alignments. This shift marks a change in a steadfast belief we thought to be true. Both state and national elections saw a rightward shift, meaning that if Democrats hope to keep the urban vote, policy positions and/or campaign strategies need to be revised. Urban areas continue to grow more diverse, which means political parties will have to adapt to keep up with a diversifying city.

Throughout my research, I found that religion can play a direct role in political decisions. I found that the five characteristics I discussed in this essay—perceptions of political candidates, moral judgments of political candidates, prioritization of key issues, attitudes towards governance, and cultural and spiritual foundations of political behavior—all represent how voters utilize their own religiosity in making political decisions. Perceptions of political candidates have become increasingly relevant in recent elections. Most political campaigns include some type of religious messaging to appeal to voters. We can see this very clearly in Donald Trump’s 2024 presidential campaign, which paid special attention to white Christian voters. These perceptions resonate deeply with the intended demographic, therefore aiding in developing a specific image of the candidate. The connection between religion and politics becomes a reality for these voters, and many will base their vote on these perceptions.

In tandem with perceptions of candidates, moral judgments are also crucial to religious voters. At the center of American politics are highly divisive issues. Religious voters often find connections to their own beliefs when making their political decisions. The positions candidates take during their campaigns spark moral judgments from voters, intentional or not. Alongside this, voters will make judgments on the prioritizations of key issues. Together, voters will connect issues they care about with candidate campaigns, issuing judgment on who should be elected. For religious voters, political decisions extend beyond base-level analysis. They use their own moral judgments and values to make a highly personal decision at the polls.

“Perceptions of political candidates have become increasingly relevant in recent elections. Most political campaigns include some type of *religious messaging* to *appeal to voters*.”

I also found that an overall attitude towards governance is a strong predictor of political behavior. In many ways, we see how the government has somewhat abandoned rural communities. Faith-based organizations often need to step in to provide services to rural communities in various ways. There are also numerous examples of the government neglecting rural communities, leaving them in a stagnant economy, far from health resources, and disconnected from federal decision-making processes. This builds an overall negative attitude towards governance, while increasing reliance and trust in religious organizations. Many rural voters may leave behind the importance of voting, as they get just as much, if not more, support from their churches or FBOs.

Each voter will also have a unique set of cultural and spiritual beliefs that may affect political behavior. Rural voters are more likely to have a strict understanding of their values and beliefs. It might encourage them to vote a certain way, as they want to see more of their beliefs represented in policy or by the government. Urban voters are more likely to incorporate their cultural understanding into their votes. Living in highly diverse areas exposes them to a diverse range of beliefs and experiences. These differences may encourage urban voters to make their decisions while considering a different set of needs.

Next, I selected a few ways to measure some functions of government and community success to see the differences in rural and urban areas. I chose to analyze economic stability, healthcare access, and social cohesion to see how religion becomes intertwined in these aspects of civic life. Economic instability is found regardless of community size. Churches and FBOs often step in, in both rural and urban communities, to fill the gaps that the government cannot provide.

“In many ways, we see how the *government* has somewhat *abandoned rural communities*. *Faith-based organizations* often need to step in to *provide services to rural communities* in various ways.”

Whether it is coordinating food pantries, job coaching, or financial advising, these organizations actively work with the community to alleviate some of the economic hardship. The same concept applies to FBOs working to provide greater access to healthcare. Rural and urban communities both experience a lack of access to affordable healthcare. Churches and FBOs can serve as a connection point for community members to access services. The government attempts to play a role in economic development and healthcare access in communities, yet resources are often lacking. This causes religion to play a larger role in many people's lives. We can also find connections between social cohesion and religiosity. Religion serves as an institution where many different people can come together. Urban areas typically have lower rates of social cohesion, whereas rural areas tend to have higher rates of social cohesion. Churches play a significant role in social cohesion; we often see them as a shared meeting place where individuals can find comfort, support, and resources. It follows that urban areas with high rates of diversity would exhibit less social cohesion, although not necessarily less religious. These aspects of civic life are crucial to consider when examining the connections between religiosity and political behavior. They can often influence one another and play a role in making unique political decisions.

“Economic instability is found regardless of community size. Churches and FBOs often step in, in both rural and urban communities, to fill the gaps that the government cannot provide.”

The last topic I wanted to explore for my research was forms of democratic participation beyond voting. I found interesting examples while researching the rural-urban divide in relation to legislative advocacy, lobbying, and public protests. Rural and urban communities present distinct sets of challenges when considering legislative advocacy. Rural communities often face geographical barriers, as they are frequently dispersed and have low population densities. This means it may be hard to organize and advocate. Urban communities experience the opposite issue; the high population density makes it difficult to organize and communicate on political issues. In both cases, churches and FBOs may step in to help inform, organize, and advocate for their communities. Lobbying is similar to legislative advocacy in some ways, but private interests often fund lobbying groups. This is where we might consider some differences in rural and urban lobbying. Rural lobbying is much more focused on the priorities of rural communities. It often deals with the economy, agriculture, or other special interests for rural communities.

Urban lobbying may be related to social policies of interest in urban communities, such as higher welfare spending, education, and public safety. Some FBOs have dedicated their resources to lobbying in order to work better towards their organization's mission. Public protesting has unique connections to religion. Depending on the FBO, protest may be encouraged or discouraged. Some religious messaging suggests that obedience is essential, including obedience to social norms or policies. Other institutions may encourage protesting, drawing on religious values of fighting for justice. Rural, conservative communities do not engage in as much protest as urban communities, which follows, as rural communities often subscribe to more conservative interpretations of religious values.

“Some *FBOs* have dedicated their resources to *lobbying* in order to work better towards their organization's *mission*.”

Upon concluding this research, we can observe interesting connections between religion, geography, and politics. Recognizing the relationship between these phenomena brings us one step closer to understanding how to overcome the social, moral, and political divides we see far too often in our society. The role of politics in America is only growing, and understanding these relationships may lead us to a more unified country.

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About the Author

Reese Kimmi is a junior at *Kansas Wesleyan University*, double majoring in Criminal Justice and Sociology, with a deep interest in how religion, politics, and civic life intersect. Her research explores how religious identity shapes democratic participation across diverse communities and faith traditions. She has gained hands-on policy experience as a Legislative Intern at the *Kansas State House of Representatives*, where she researched issues such as food insecurity and education funding, and as a Conference Intern with the *Kansas Emergency Management Association*, supporting operations and studying emergency management and homeland security. Currently, she serves as a Direct Support Professional with *OCCK, Inc.*, helping individuals with intellectual and physical disabilities build independence and navigate government disability services. Reese joined the CFGI in partnership with *The Washington Center* to further her engagement at the intersection of public service, policy, and civic leadership.

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