

NEWSROOM

The divide between us: Urban-rural political differences rooted in geography

Research finds how partisan affiliation gets shaped by people's proximity to a city

By [Sara Savat](#) | February 18, 2020

The divide between urban and rural voters in the United States is nothing new, but its cause has been less clear. A new study by Washington University in St. Louis political scientists finds that it isn't personal profiles, but rather proximity to bigger cities that drives the political divide.

The researchers, using Gallup survey data between 2003-18, found evidence that the urban-rural political divide — more noticeable and decisive in recent elections — is rooted in geography and not merely differences in the type of people living in these places. How close people live to a major metropolitan area, defined as cities of at least 100,000, and their town's population density play a significant role in shaping their political beliefs and partisan affiliation. [The paper](#) will be published in an upcoming issue of Political Behavior.



Reeves



“Urban-rural differences in partisan political loyalty is as familiar in the United States as they are in other countries,” said study co-author Andrew J. Reeves, associate professor of political science in Arts & Sciences. “The general consensus has been that the origins of this divide lie within the personal characteristics of the people who live in rural or urban communities.

“However, our research found that the explanation was not that simple.”

In their research analysis, Reeves and Bryant J. Moy, a PhD candidate in the political science department, along with two University of Maryland co-authors, found that geography is related to substantial differences in partisanship even after accounting for a host of individual traits like age, race, gender, education and religious adherence.

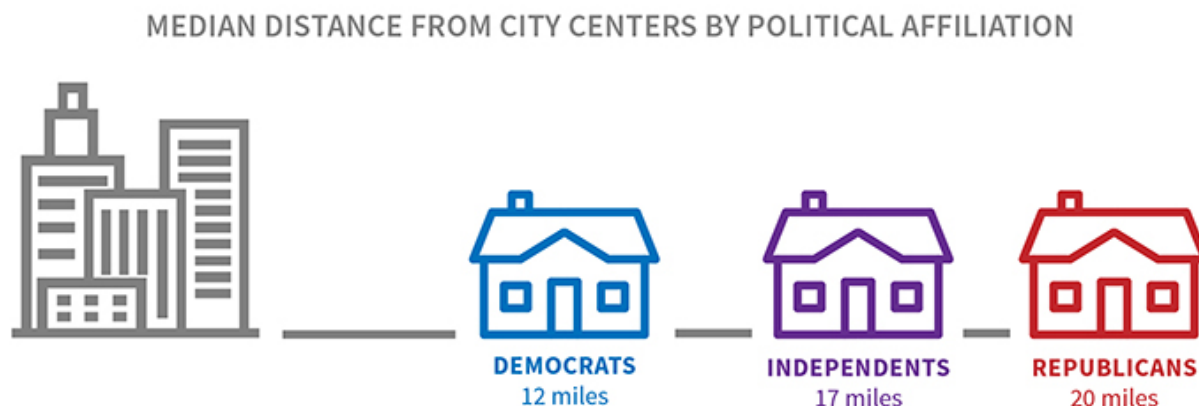
For instance, holding all other individual characteristics constant, an individual’s probability of identifying as a strong Democrat drops by 12 percentage points if they live in a far rural area. Likewise, their analysis suggests that a person living in a densely packed community is about 11 points more likely to identify as a strong Democrat compared with that same person living in a sparsely populated area.



Moy

“On the one hand, our findings should not surprise anyone. Life experiences shape our perceptions of the world. On the other hand, we tend to overlook how the social environment —outside of race, gender and income — plays a role in our partisan identity,” Moy said.

“And that is the main takeaway from our research. The environment around us — the distance we live away from a metropolitan area and population density — shapes what we think about the political world and the partisan labels we adopt.”



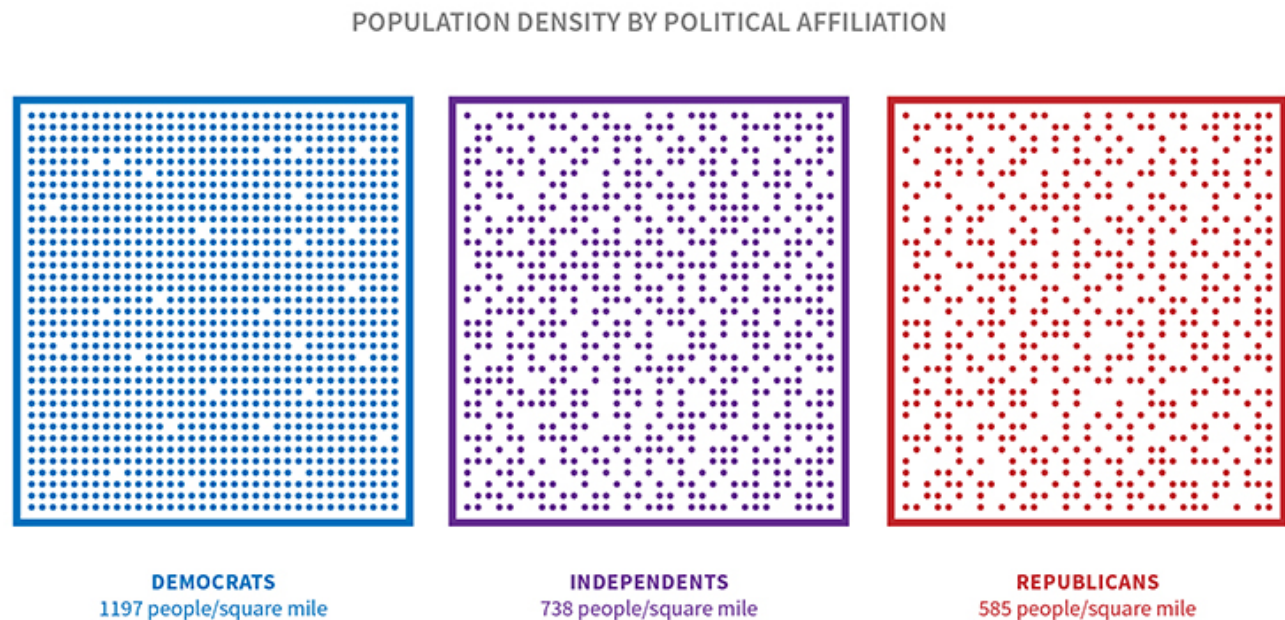
In terms of distance from a large metropolitan city, their analysis showed that, on average, Republicans lived 20 miles from a city, while independents lived 17 miles away and Democrats lived 12 miles away.

The physical urban-rural gap was smaller among racial and ethnic groups and those who have higher education and higher income. Among college degree holders, Republicans lived 17 miles from the city while Democrats lived 10 miles from the city. Hispanic Republicans lived nine miles from the city while Hispanic Democrats lived seven miles from the city. Although the gap was smaller among these subgroups, it was still significant enough to be decisive in a closely contested race.

Small towns have always been conservative-leaning. People living in rural areas tend to have traditional values and be resistant to new ideas, Reeves said.

“In rural, less populated areas, residents are more likely to know one another and talk with their neighbors. Those interpersonal relationships are highly influential and can create a social pressure to conform,” he said.

“There also is a lot of resentment on the part of rural residents toward urban communities. There is a common perception that cities receive more than their fair share of resources and look down on rural communities. The media helps enforce these beliefs with news coverage that predominantly focuses on big cities and the interests of urbanites.”



In contrast, large, heavily populated cities have traditionally been more open to liberal ideas and more accommodating toward unconventional behaviors and beliefs. City dwellers have a greater opportunity to interact with diverse people, which fosters tolerance. They also have the ability to be anonymous, which encourages respect for people’s privacy.

According to Reeves, one might come to the conclusion that people choose to live in urban or rural communities based on their values and political beliefs, but recent research suggests that a small share of movers consider political factors directly in their decision-making process.

“There is a striking and significant association between geography of residence and party identification,” Reeves said. “In both urban and rural settings, geography and population density seem to exert a socializing impact on partisan identification while perhaps also serving as a draw for movers

seeking a fitting and compatible destination.”

These findings have implications in the 2020 election and beyond, Reeves said.

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Andrew Reeves

“As we have long known, Democratic voters tend to pack themselves into cities, which is inefficient in terms of winning seats or electoral college votes,” he said. “Look at Missouri, for example. St. Louis, Kansas City and Columbia are blue and then the rest of the state is red.

“By virtue of how we elect our members of Congress and even our president, Democrats are at a disadvantage, and it might only get worse based on the type of campaigning we see going in the primaries.

“Many of the Democratic candidates are leaning further to the left. This is not going to win over the rural voters who are more resistant to progressive ideas. The Democratic party is going to be at an increased electoral disadvantage if they decide they want to be the party of the urban progressive.”