## Chapter 17: Country blues

It’s hard not to think about this difference between cities and the countryside in terms of politics. This is because, broadly speaking, politics is about the push and pull of interests, ideologies, and identities. In a country with strong institutions and the rule of law, laws and institutions form a *status quo*, and in response to the populace’s push and pull, these change over time. The “first principal component” of politics can be thought of in terms of that trajectory. Progressive people want to push forward with change, while conservative people want to slow the rate of change, or even reverse it.

Obviously, politics are a lot more complicated than this one-dimensional cartoon. The variety of answers to the optional, vaguely worded “essay question” on the political surveys I ran in 2016 and 2020 reveal the complexity (and occasional zaniness) of people’s convictions:

i want to dissolve the two party system, legalize all drugs and end the drug war, then use that money to provide rehab and drug awareness. Stop bombing overseas and start rebuilding, help local groups fight back against terrorism and tyranny by funding and equipping them rather than direct intervention. i think we should all have guns, free healthcare, and welfare for the poor but take government out of it as much as possible.[[1]](#footnote-21)

I am a conservative liberal. People have the right to do and be who they are as long as it does not physically harm another person who has been born.[[2]](#footnote-22)

I’m a monarchist. We’re misunderstood by liberal whites.[[3]](#footnote-23)

An American monarchist!

Still, the “progressive versus conservative” dimension does appear to capture the lion’s share of the variance in people’s beliefs, both in the US and in many other countries. Hence the name of the progressive grassroots organization MoveOn.org, and on the other hand, by the rallying cry

make america great again![[4]](#footnote-24)

If we combine this simple model of politics with the idea that population density drives cultural evolution, a simple prediction emerges: that local population density will play a bigger role than any other single factor in determining a person’s politics. This was a hypothesis I set out to test when I first began running Mechanical Turk surveys in 2016. These surveys included not only questions about voting, but also about current social issues, including:

* Do you believe that global warming is an imminent threat?
* Are you in favor of a woman’s right to an abortion?
* Do you consider yourself a supporter or ally of LGBT rights?
* Are you a supporter of same sex marriage rights?
* Are you a supporter of the Black Lives Matter movement?
* Are you in favor of federally funded universal healthcare?
* Is the imposition of Sharia law within the US a threat?
* Should the US be more aggressive in deporting illegal immigrants?
* Are white Americans being systematically undermined or discriminated against?
* Do you believe that enacting gun control measures is a bad idea?
* Do you consider homosexuality morally wrong?
* Should the US put a halt to the immigration of Muslims?

In 2020, as in 2016, answers to all of these dozen questions follow one of two patterns as a function of population density. The first six generate an overwhelming “yes” (typically 90-100%) from people in the densest ZIP codes, but drop down dramatically in the countryside.

Climate change, marriage equality, and abortion rights are broadly popular causes; support for these only barely drops below half in the most sparsely populated places. LGBT rights, Black Lives Matter, and universal healthcare are more divisive, with support in the countryside dropping to 20-30%— though even for these issues, the great majority of ZIP codes, covering not only the cities and suburbs but even much of the countryside, remains a robust 60-70%. It’s only in the most sparsely populated places that we see a big dropoff.

The remaining six questions follow exactly the opposite pattern. Less than 10% of people in the densest urban ZIP codes say “yes”, but upward of 50% of those in the deep countryside do, with concern about gun control, Sharia law, and deporting illegal immigrants reaching 80%.

Consider the question, “Is the imposition of Sharia law within the US a threat?”. Sharia (شريعة‎) meaning “Islamic law”, is a religious law forming part of the Islamic tradition.[[5]](#footnote-25) According to the US Constitution, no religious tradition can be used as the basis for any law, though common Christian beliefs and values have clearly shaped popular opinion, and hence law, about a variety of issues, such as abortion. Muslim Americans are a small minority, making the likelihood that Muslim religious traditions could likewise gain political traction in the US anytime soon far-fetched. What’s especially interesting about this question, though, is its relationship with the actual presence of Muslims in the neighborhood.

There are considerably fewer Muslims in the US than Jews. In the densest ZIP codes, the Jewish population exceeds 12%— though the imposition of Jewish religious law, Halakha (הֲלָכָה) seems less of a popular concern.[[6]](#footnote-26) Muslim Americans, too, tend to live near cities, though their numbers are greatest just *outside* the urban core. Nowhere does their concentration exceed 4% or so. In the deep countryside, they disappear entirely from the population. Yet it’s in these places, where there are no Muslims in sight, that people are most concerned by Muslim immigration and Sharia law.

Similarly, when we graph answers to the questions “Were you born in the US?” and “Are you white?”, we find a powerful sorting effect. Fewer than half of those living in inner cities identify as white, and fewer than 60% were born in the US. In the most rural ZIP codes, though, virtually everyone is white and native-born. Yet 60% of this same rural population answers “yes” to “Are white Americans oppressed?”. That number is close to 0% in the city.

This may be because, in a bustling city, people of different races live close to each other and can see how others live. They walk by each other on the street, mix socially, and eat together; they might become friends, go on dates, end up raising a family together. Whatever your background, other races and ethnicities aren’t a mystery in the city, and given firsthand exposure to nonwhite people, it’s hard for most white people to cling to a conviction that *they* are singled out or structurally disadvantaged, or that immigrant neighborhoods pose an existential threat.

On the other hand, rural America is quite isolated. In many respects it’s not exactly thriving nowadays— partly due to the emptying-out effect of end stage urbanization. It’s unsurprising that this can generate resentment, or, given a largely homogeneous racial makeup, that resentment can become racially charged. The easiest “other” is someone who isn’t present, someone you can imagine enjoying a better life elsewhere.

Why is the countryside so overwhelmingly white? There are a few reasons. Some trace back to Jim Crow era racist land policies, and associated waves of so-called “white flight” to the suburbs throughout the twentieth century. One of the more infamous practices, often referred to as “redlining”, involves federal and local governments drawing racial boundaries on maps, and either denying services to people within certain areas or using selective pricing to enforce *de facto* segregation. For instance, in the 1980s, Pulitzer Prize winning investigative reporter Bill Dedman showed how, in Atlanta, banks would often finance mortgages for lower-income whites, but not for middle- or even upper-income Black people, in effect excluding them from certain neighborhoods.[^7]

When immigrants come to the US, they also typically arrive in— and remain in— the cities. Not only are cities where the educational and economic opportunities tend to be; they’re also, as we’ve seen, the places to go for minorities of all kinds to find community. That’s probably why, at the rural extreme of the density scale, we don’t find a single survey respondent who wasn’t born in the US!

This helps explain the left half of the graph— the mixed makeup of inner cities and suburbs— and why people in the countryside tend to be native-born. Most Black Americans aren’t recent immigrants, though. So why do so few of them live in rural places?

Redlining is usually regarded as a city and suburb phenomenon, but equally unfair things have happened to Black farmers. *The Counter*, a “nonprofit, independent, nonpartisan newsroom investigating the forces shaping how and what America eats”, published an investigative piece in 2019 detailing a century-long history of systematic discrimination against Black farmers by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA):

USDA and federal farm policy are largely responsible for driving black people out of farming almost entirely. Black farmers lost around 90 percent of the land they owned between 1910 and 1997, while white farmers lost only about 2 percent over the same period.

Structural inequalities aren’t limited to discrimination against Black people, either. In the US, 86% of farm owner-operators are male, and only 6% are Hispanic, despite the fact that 80% of farm laborers are Hispanic. While there a number of reasons for this, one is that they, too, have been targeted by exclusionary policies. Asian and Native American landowners have also been systematically disenfranchised.[[7]](#footnote-27)

The countryside’s homogeneity— and the near absence of any immigrant influx— has had another effect too: the rural population today is quite a bit older than the urban population. This is because as societies industrialize, their birth rates plummet. In countries with advanced economies but very low immigration rates, like Japan, this has led to a population strongly skewed toward older people. The same has happened in the American countryside, as we can see from Census Bureau data.

[<https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/stories/2019/10/older-population-in-rural-america-figure-3.jpg>]

Remember that, in every breakdown by age, being older proved to be a powerful predictor of conservatism. And, as we’ve seen, so is living in the countryside, even when we hold age constant. So, the higher proportion of older people in the countryside creates a compounding effect. Rural places end up more conservative, older, whiter, and more heteronormative. They aren’t exposed to much diversity, and that makes them even more afraid of the invisible “other”. It also makes them feel outnumbered and threatens their sense of being the majoritarian norm. Indeed, they’re right to believe that they no longer are.

If you’re living in a rural place and you’re “other”— whether that means Black, queer, non-monogamous, or for that matter just not so conservative— it also means you’re likelier to move to the city if you can, because you probably won’t find community in the countryside. This explains why we’ve found ourselves in a feedback loop, with the rural places becoming *more* conservative over time, even as the cities become more progressive.

We can see some evidence of such shifts over time by comparing responses to the survey in 2016 and in 2020, when I re-ran it with many of the same questions. Graphing support for the Black Lives Matter movement as a function of density illustrates the way social change originating in cities tends to be slow in percolating into rural places.

Support for BLM was always higher in the city than in the countryside, but in 2016 the differences were a bit less stark— around 80% in the city, and a bit over 20% in the deep countryside. By 2020, things had changed. BLM gained a huge amount of support across the board. However, at the lowest densities, support for BLM remained nearly unchanged at about 30%. That makes the issue look a lot more polarized, but in this case it’s not because people in the countryside have gotten any more conservative. They’ve just stayed put— at least, as best we can tell given large error bars in the most rural places.

However, Black Lives Matter is the exception, not the rule. Over those four years, so many more people have become aware of racially biased policing that “staying put” arguably looks more like swimming against the tide. We can see rising rural conservatism in the answers about climate change, deporting illegal immigrants, banning Muslim immigration, and perhaps most strikingly, responses to the question “Are white Americans being systematically undermined or discriminated against?”.

As the city and suburbs liberalize, the countryside is not only digging in its heels, but becoming increasingly conservative, xenophobic, and aggrieved.

I’m a proud white nationalist.[[8]](#footnote-30)

I am a white male and thus hated in my own country.[[9]](#footnote-31)

This xenophobia is not only racial, but also targets gender and sexual minorities, as we can see in the changing response to “Do you consider homosexuality morally wrong?”:

While these curves look similar in the city and suburbs from 2016 to 2020, rising from around 10% to about 30%, moral disapproval of homosexuality in the most rural places has nearly tripled over these four years, rising from around 20% to nearly 60%.[[10]](#footnote-32) It’s easy to see why, if you’re queer and grow up in the countryside, you’ll probably want to move to the city as soon as you can, especially nowadays. This, in turn, amplifies the political urban/rural sorting effect.

If you glance back at the Census Bureau demographic plot, you can see how right at 18, the age at which kids become legal adults in much of the US, the rural population takes an immediate dive and the urban population rises by about the same amount. Of course that’s also the age at which many kids go to college, but it’s a safe bet that the incentive to move to the city, whether to go to college or just to take your chances on the job market there, will be a lot higher if you don’t fit in where you grew up. And if you *do* find your community in the city, you’re less likely to return to the countryside later in life.

To progressives, one of the most alarming trends is the increasingly pro-gun stance of rural Americans. This likely goes along with higher rates of armament, not just with hunting weapons but with arsenals of long guns and machine guns associated with tactical assault or warfare.[^12] Whether these can be considered reasonable investments in “self-defense” depends on whether one is talking about defending a home against an intruder or a village against an invading army. In cities, where most deaths from gun violence actually occur, less than 10% of the population feels that it would be a bad idea to enact stronger gun control measures. Yet we see that the sense of needing armed protection from “those other people” is highest in the countryside. In 2016, half felt that stricter gun control was a bad idea, but by 2020, that figure had risen above 80%.

At the end of Part II, noting the way so many of us spend most of our time online nowadays, I posed the half-serious question, “Does this mean we’ve already been uploaded?”. Put another way, does where we live matter anymore, or are we all living virtually, in a kind of simulation of social life in which the constraints of space have been erased? The answer appears to be “yes”. That is, we *do* live largely online, yet where we live *physically* still, apparently, matters— a lot. Otherwise, we wouldn’t see such dramatic variations in attitudes and values by ZIP code.

Part of this is evidently accounted for by a geographic “sorting hat” effect, in which certain sub-populations end up better represented in the countryside, and others in the city. However, this is unlikely to be the whole story. We’ve seen strong evidence of the power of social contagion in determining our perspectives, attitudes, and identities: we’re influenced by our friends. Our friends, in turn, tend to be nearby, even in this era of ubiquitous online communication. In his 2021 book *Friends*, British anthropologist Robin Dunbar summarizes a wealth of evidence showing the correlation between friendship and physical proximity:

There is an unwritten law in the study of social networks known as the ‘Thirty-Minute Rule’: you will make the effort to see someone, and view them as important to you, if they live within thirty minutes’ travel time of where you live. It doesn’t seem to matter much whether this is thirty minutes on foot, by bicycle, or by car. It’s the psychological significance of the time it takes you to get there. That being so, you might suppose that you would be more inclined to phone or text those who live beyond the thirty-minute limit to make up for the fact that you can’t get round to see them in person. In fact, it seems that you don’t. You are more likely to phone the friends that live near you, as Hang-Hyun Jo was able to show from an analysis of phone-call patterns[^13] […]. [Y]ou phone most often the people you see most often. […] When people move away and don’t have the opportunity to meet up so often, friendships seem to flag surprisingly quickly […] [A] friendship of high strength will decline to no more than a mere acquaintanceship in just three years.[^14]

This explains why geography continues to matter when it comes to our beliefs and identities. We may spend many hours each day online, interacting with friends and scrolling through social media; but who those friends are, hence which social media, will depend in no small part on where we live.

Where is this heading? The stark and rising polarization paints an alarming picture for observers on either side of the political divide.

I think European Americans need to hold a referendum to cut our losses. We can separate into two groups, those who are loyal to the Caucasian race and those who are not, aka white race traitors. Those who are disloyal can get out. They can take their Jewish conspirators with them for the 1965 Immigration Reform Act and the Federal Reserve. First order of business; civil war to establish a new “whites only” nation. Second on the list; nuke Israel for 9/11. The researchers might think European Americans and members of the Caucasian race are unaware we are experiencing genocide. We are. And white leadership, across the board, is directly responsible for it. My guess, think the French Revolution on acid is what is coming our way.[[11]](#footnote-33)

It has become commonplace to characterize the growing divide as a possible prelude to civil war. Our situation is very different from the one preceding the US Civil War, though; that war was fought between a bloc of northern emancipated states and a bloc of southern slave states. That’s not how it breaks down now. It’s hard to imagine a “civil war” between the cities and the countryside— because they’re so mutually dependent, and the “borders” don’t look like country borders at all.

An early “culture wars” meme from the 2004 presidential election depicted a satirical “Jesusland map”, with Jesusland consisting of the states in the heartland and south, and a “United States of Canada” combining the more liberal coasts with our low-key, progressive neighbor to the north. This state-by-state political picture is inaccurate, though. The real “Jesusland map” looks more like the NASA night map— and that just doesn’t look like a map of two countries in any conventional sense. It looks like an increasingly interconnected network of “United Cities” pitted against a vast, sparsely populated, and increasingly conservative hinterland. This is why we see analogous polarization happening in other countries too, even those that have nothing comparable to the American Civil War in their histories.

One of the reasons the political divide seems especially stark in the US is our entrenched two-party system, which has in recent years shifted to align itself almost perfectly with this rural-urban axis. In 2016, ZIP code density already did a better job of predicting voting for Trump or Clinton at the urban or rural end of the spectrum than any other obvious variable (e.g. race, gender, education, wealth).

In June 2020, the conservative voting pattern was virtually unchanged, especially among conservative voters in the sparsest ZIP codes. There was much more of a shift in the progressive vote in urban and suburban ZIP codes, where a larger (and decisive) fraction of people said they would vote for Joe Biden. Notably, while Biden was apparently less divisive than Clinton, he was doing no better than she did in deeply rural places.

For better or worse, democracy, and especially its American two-party variant, is inherently biased toward inertia. Put another way, there’s a conservative bias. The arrow of time itself works against progressivism. There are many possible ways forward, while the past (even if we mythologize it) is easier to pin down, hence easier to form a coalition around. Relatedly, conservatives tend to evolve more slowly in their positions— or they couldn’t be called “conservative”. They’re also a more homogeneous population, which makes them more coherent in their cultural values and positions; conservatives can effectively align and push for a stable agenda over many years, while diverse, faster-evolving progressives with divergent visions or hot takes spend more time infighting. Conservatives are “dog people”, loyal and able to hunt effectively in packs (or PACs!), while progressives are more like “cat people”, individualistic and impossible to herd.

This observation is something more than a snappy cliché, as illustrated by psychological research from Jonathan Haidt and colleagues into the systematic differences between the way liberals and conservatives evaluate moral choices. As they wrote in a highly influential 2009 paper,[[12]](#footnote-34)

We […] do not think of political ideology— or morality—as a strictly one-dimensional spectrum. In fact, we consider it a strength of [our] theory that it allows people and ideologies to be characterized along five dimensions. Nonetheless, we expect that the individualizing–binding distinction can account for substantial variation in the moral concerns of the political left and right, especially in the United States, and that it illuminates disagreements underlying many “culture war” issues.

The five dimensions of their “Moral Foundations Theory” are harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. The first two are “individualizing” or, as we’ve put it, cat-like. The last three are “binding”, or dog-like. Liberals rely far more on the individualizing values in making their judgments, while conservatives rely on all five. More recent work[[13]](#footnote-35) from researchers at the University of Birmingham in the UK supports the connection between these moral frameworks and politics:

Individualizing-Ingroup Preference and Binding-Ingroup Preference scores predicted more Attitude Bias and more Negative Attitude Bias toward immigrants […], more Implicit Bias […], and more Perceived Threat from immigrants […]. We also demonstrated that increasing liberalism was associated with less Attitude Bias and less Negative Bias toward immigrants […], less Implicit Bias […], and less Perceived Threat from immigrants […].

Beyond these inherent challenges to progressive change, when we consider this chapter’s graphs alongside the population density curves from the previous chapter, something odd and perhaps undemocratic comes to light. About 90% of the US population lives below 30,000 square meters per person (about halfway between 10,000 and 100,000 in the logarithmic view we’ve been using), which is roughly where the voting curves cross over each other. And indeed, the Democrats garnered more votes than the Republicans in both the 2020 *and* the 2016 elections. But all votes aren’t equal.

[[link](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/01/learning/whats-going-on-in-this-graph-nov-7-2018.html) to image; based on NYT’s [An Extremely Detailed Map of the 2016 Presidential Election](https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/upshot/election-2016-voting-precinct-maps.html)]

By land area, the country looks very “red”. By population count, it has already tipped to “blue”. It’s precisely because of urbanization and political sorting by density that the county-by-county voting map looks the way it does. Unfortunately for progressive people, by apportioning voting and legislative power by geographical area, the American electoral system effectively gives a lot more political power to the rural population. Unless the rules change, our politics will always lag significantly behind our demographics.

This also paints a stark picture of the real legacy of white supremacy in the United States. When Black, Native, Asian, and Hispanic people were systematically excluded from or pushed out of farming to create a “white countryside”, they were not only deprived of income, the ability to accumulate wealth, and a legacy to pass on to future generations; they and their descendants were also excluded from political representation in the very places where votes carry disproportionate weight. In cities and suburbs, there’s a long history of voter suppression and disenfranchisement targeting Black and other minority communities. But even if a Black person manages to vote in the city, their ballot counts for only a fraction of what it would have had they cast it in the countryside. And as the countryside continues to empty out, the relative voting power of those who remain there increases further.

~~not really.~~ ive seen several examples of the electoral college proving that not every vote matters. how can someone get more votes by the people who politics is supposed to serve yet the person with less real votes ends up being the winner. it taught me that voting is pointless and my opinion doesnt matter.[[14]](#footnote-38)

1. A 26 year old white man from Citra, Florida. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
2. A 35 year old woman from Columbus, Ohio, who in describing herself notes, “My father is Nigerian and my mother is Native American and Black European. I do consider myself African American, not Black”. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
3. A 36 year old man from Oxford, Mississippi. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
4. A 56 year old man from Laramie, Wyoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
5. Hence technically “Sharia law” is a redundant phrase, like “pizza pie” or “panini sandwich”. Note to non-Italian speakers: *pizza* means “pie”, and *panino*, the singular of *panini*, means “sandwich”. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
6. Though in fairness, at least half of American Jews are secular to the point of being agnostic or atheist. (See [[REF]].) Antisemitism still exists, as evidenced by the substantial number of people, both urban and rural, answering “yes” to the question “Are Jewish interests overrepresented in Washington?” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
7. Horst and Marion, 2018, [link](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Amy_Marion/publication/328570754_Racial_ethnic_and_gender_inequities_in_farmland_ownership_and_farming_in_the_US/links/5c913d3392851cf0ae898fe5/Racial-ethnic-and-gender-inequities-in-farmland-ownership-and-farming-in-the-US.pdf). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
8. A 33 year old man from Aurora, Colorado. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
9. A 46 year old man from Niagara Falls, New York. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
10. As usual when the error bars are large, these percentages are far from exact; still, the qualitative difference between 2016 and 2020 is obvious and dramatic. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
11. A 55 year old from Raleigh, North Carolina. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
12. Graham, Jesse, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian A. Nosek. “Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations.” *Journal of personality and social psychology* 96, no. 5 (2009): 1029. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
13. Stewart, Brandon D., and David SM Morris. “Moving morality beyond the in-group: liberals and conservatives show differences on group-framed Moral Foundations and these differences mediate the relationships to perceived bias and threat.” *Frontiers in psychology* 12 (2021). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
14. A 35 year old from East Windsor, Connecticut. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)