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Rural Voters in Presidential Elections, 1992-2004

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Abstract

The “Red” versus “Blue” state debate has reached a fever pitch in popular commentary, but scholars have contributed very little to the discussion by way of examining rural voting behavior. With the use of national exit poll data, this study attempts to fill this considerable void, with a detailed analysis of rural voters in the 1992-2004 presidential elections. In 1992 and 1996 the rural vote was split between the parties, but in 2000 the rural vote shifted decidedly in favor of Republican George W. Bush and it stayed with the incumbent in 2004. This research on the voting behavior of rural voters in recent presidential elections documents and evaluates the many differences between rural and non-rural voters, and accounts for several of the factors leading to an increase in rural Republican voting in 2000 and 2004. The conventional wisdom that rural voters are more likely to be so-called values voters is true and this translates into greater Republican support. Further, on virtually every survey item in which their non-rural counterparts share the same survey response, rural voters are consistently more Republican in their presidential vote choice. Dissatisfaction with President Clinton—termed Clinton fatigue—was much more pronounced among rural voters and this was a major reason for the strong rural shift in favor of the Republican Party in 2000.

KEYWORDS: rural voters, vote choice, Clinton fatigue, values, Democratic Party, Republican Party

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Recent political commentary drones on and on about “Red” versus “Blue” states. Scholars have made thoughtful contributions to this growing literature on partisan polarization (see Abramowitz and Saunders 2005; Bartels 2006; Fiorina et al. 2005; Flanigan and Zingale 2006, 118-120; Klinkner and Hapanowicz 2005; Oppenheimer 2005), but they have contributed very little (exceptions include Francia and Baumgartner 2006; Gimpel and Karnes 2006) to the debate by way of an examination of the voting behavior of rural voters, who, at least according to popular accounts are the reddest of the red state voters.¹ Relying on data from national exit polls, this study attempts to fill this considerable void, by providing a detailed analysis of rural voters in the 1992-2004 presidential elections.

Over the last several presidential elections the rural vote has proven pivotal to determining the winner.² In this sense, rural voting has exhibited a dynamic pattern, roughly breaking even for the Democratic and Republican candidates in 1992 and 1996 and then shifting decidedly in favor of the Republican in 2000 and 2004. The dynamic of the rural presidential vote in these elections indicates the importance of candidate qualities. With the exception of rural southerners (who have recently moved in favor of the Republican Party), the rural vote has historically been more Republican and yet Democrat Bill Clinton was able to neutralize it in his two successful presidential bids. By contrast, Republican George W. Bush took a comfortable majority of the rural vote—votes he had to have in order to win his two presidential campaigns.

This study sheds light on three primary questions: (1) What characteristics distinguish rural from non-rural voters? (2) What factors contributed to the marked shift of rural voters in favor of the Republican Party in the 2000 presidential election? And (3) Controlling for other factors, are rural residents more likely to vote Republican in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections? Throughout the analyses, a simple dichotomy is used to distinguish rural voters from all other voters who are designated as non-rural.³

¹ The focus of the red state/blue state debate is rarely narrowed to an examination of rural voting behavior. The bulk of the discussion among academics and the media centers on the motives of rural voters, whether or not they are so-called “values voters.” The evidence for, or against a “Culture War,” (see Layman and Green 2005) overshadows the significance of the rural vote in contemporary presidential elections.

² The polling firm of Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research conducted a series of polls targeting rural voters in battleground states in the 2004 presidential election for The Center for Rural Strategies (<http://www.ruralstrategies.org/8055/polling2.html>) and wrote a very informative report on rural voters for the W. K. Kellogg Foundation titled, “The Message from Rural America: The Rural Vote in 2004.” The report is available through the W. K. Kellogg Foundation website (<http://www.wkkf.org>). This report demonstrates convincingly that the rural vote has played a critical role in deciding recent presidential elections.

³ Because considerable political variation exists among urban residents, with central city voters decidedly Democratic and suburban voters dividing fairly evenly between the parties (see

I begin with a presentation of summary statistics that show the differences between rural and non-rural voters and how this translates into vote choice. Then, I consider the relevance of social issues and dissatisfaction with Bill Clinton as reasons for the marked increase in rural Republican voting in 2000. Next, I present multivariate analyses for the 2000 and 2004 elections. For each year there are two models with the same set of control variables. The first model assesses which characteristics distinguish rural voters from non-rural voters and the second evaluates vote choice to assess whether rural residents were more likely to vote Republican in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections.

Rural vs. Non-Rural Voters, 1992-2004

In the political geography literature scholars disagree on whether there is something inherent in a place that can affect political behavior above and beyond the fact that the characteristics of individuals may vary considerably depending on location (see Agnew 1996; Gimpel and Schuknecht 2003; King 1996). Indeed, the role of place in shaping and affecting political behavior is a classic chicken and egg problem: Does the setting mold the behavior or do individuals with certain characteristics shape the behavior exhibited in the place? Instead of launching a perilous expedition to answer this question, suffice it to say that in the American context, the characteristics of rural and non-rural voters vary considerably and this affects their voting behavior in presidential elections.

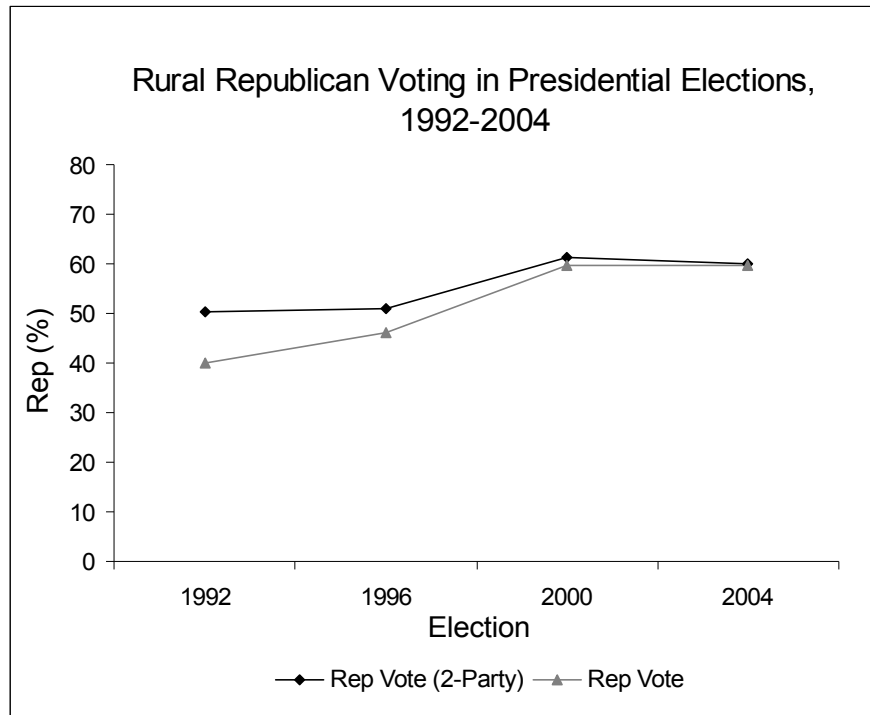
In the 1992 and 1996 presidential elections the rural vote was roughly split in half among the two major parties. By contrast, in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections rural voters had shifted Republican by a large margin. Figure 1 displays the rural Republican two-party vote share and the rural Republican share of the vote including third party candidates in presidential elections from 1992 through 2004. In 1992 and 1996 Democrat Bill Clinton managed to split the Republican share of the two-party vote, garnering 49.6% in 1992 and 48.9% in 1996. By contrast, in 2000 and 2004 Republican George W. Bush took 61.3% and 60.0% of the rural two-party vote, respectively.⁴ Not only is there a surge in the rural

Gainsborough 2005; McKee and Shaw 2003), I think it is more defensible to label those who are not rural residents as simply non-rural.

⁴ In 2000 and 2004, it should come as no surprise that “red” states contain a higher percentage of rural voters. Using the classification scheme presented in Shaw (2007), in the 2000 and 2004 presidential campaigns each major party candidate has every state coded as either a base state (Democratic or Republican), a lean state (Democratic or Republican), or a battleground state. I collapse these five categories into three, with Democratic base and lean states coded blue, Republican base and lean states coded red, and battleground states coded purple. If there is disagreement on the classification of a state—viewed as a battleground for one candidate and a lean state for the other party—I coded the state purple. In 2000, the blue states are: CA, CT, DC, DE, HI, IL, MA, MD, NJ, NY, RI, and VT; red states are: AK, AL, AZ, CO, GA, ID, IN, KS, KY,

Republican vote in 2000 and 2004, but the lion's share of Republican electoral support comes from rural voters.⁵

Figure 1



SOURCE: Data were calculated from national exit polls: 1992 Voter Research and Surveys, 1996 Voter News Service, 2000 Voter News Service, and 2004 National Election Pool. Data are weighted. The Republican percentage of the vote not limited to the two major parties accounts for Perot in 1992 and 1996, Nader and Buchanan in 2000, and Nader in 2004.

LA, MS, MT, NC, ND, NE, NV, OH, OK, SC, SD, TX, UT, VA, and WY; purple states are: AR, FL, IA, ME, MI, MN, MO, NH, NM, OR, PA, TN, WA, WI, and WV. In 2004, the blue states are: CA, CT, DC, DE, HI, IL, MA, MD, NJ, NY, RI, and VT; the red states are: AK, AL, AR, AZ, CO, GA, ID, IN, KS, KY, LA, MS, MT, NC, ND, NE, OK, SC, SD, TN, TX, UT, VA, and WY; the purple states are: FL, IA, ME, MI, MN, MO, NH, NM, NV, OH, OR, PA, WA, WI, and WV. Combining the data from the 2000 exit poll (Voter News Service) with the 2004 exit poll (National Election Pool) gives us the following percentage of rural voters according to each state category: (1) red states: 27% rural voters, (2) blue states: 11% rural voters, and (3) purple states: 19% rural voters. The Republican share of the two-party vote cast among rural versus non-rural voters in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, according to each state category was: (1) red states: rural = 68%, non-rural = 55%; (2) blue states: rural = 52%, non-rural = 42%; (3) purple states: rural = 53%, non-rural = 48%.

⁵ For non-rural voters, the Republican share of the presidential vote (two-party) exhibited very little movement from 1992-2004: 45.2% in 1992, 43.7% in 1996, 46.4% in 2000, and 49.9% in 2004.

A starting point for evaluating rural Republican voting is to find out how rural voters differ from non-rural voters across a broad range of characteristics—many of which should impact vote choice. Table 1 includes a battery of survey questions asked of rural and non-rural voters in the 1992-2004 presidential election national exit polls. For each year there are two columns. The first column for each year presents the distribution of rural and non-rural voters responding to each survey question. The second column then displays the percentage of rural and non-rural voters in each category who voted Republican (two-party vote).

The survey questions in Table 1 include race/ethnicity, age (four categories), education (five categories), income (three categories), marital status (yes or no), gender, region⁶ (South and Non-South), religion (five categories), party identification (Republican, Independent, and Democrat), and political ideology (conservative, moderate, and liberal). It is clear from the table that rural and non-rural voters differ on almost every survey item. Compared to non-rural voters, rural voters are less racially/ethnically diverse, older, less educated, lower income, more likely to be married, more male for two elections (1992 and 2000), more protestant and other Christian (but less Catholic), and more conservative and less liberal. The percentage of rural voters is higher in the South in three out of four elections. And with respect to party identification, the percentage of Republican rural voters has increased and the percentage of rural Democrats has decreased. This last finding certainly impacts election outcomes because of the obvious effect of party identification on vote choice.

Turning to the differences in vote choice among rural and non-rural voters, with only a handful of exceptions, rural voters are more likely to vote Republican in every comparable category of survey item. With regard to age, income, marital status, gender, and region, for every single response category the rate of rural Republican voting exceeds the rate registered by non-rural voters. With respect to education, except for rural voters in 1996 who undertook post-graduate studies (rural Republican vote is 42% versus 44% for non-rural voters), the rate of Republican voting is higher among rural voters in every category.

White rural voters are considerably more Republican in their vote choice than are non-rural whites and this difference substantially widens in 2000 and 2004—those elections that register a significant increase in rural Republican voting. In the case of religion, rural Catholics are less Republican in 1992, but apart from this exception, in every category in every year the rural Republican vote exceeds or matches the non-rural Republican vote.⁷ Finally, in the case of ideology the

⁶ The South includes the eleven former Confederate states: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.

⁷ In every election the Jewish category contains less than fifty rural voters and that is why I have excluded the vote choice comparison.

rural Republican vote exceeds the non-rural Republican vote in every category except for conservatives in 1992 and 1996.

Since there was a surge in Republican voting among rural voters in 2000 it is imperative to locate where the jump in rural Republican voting occurred among the various survey item categories in Table 1. By comparing the differences in Republican voting among rural and non-rural voters in 1996 with 2000, it is evident that the rise in rural Republican voting occurs in practically every category of each survey item. With the exception of college graduates and voters with family incomes exceeding \$75,000—in every other category of survey item the rural Republican vote increases in 2000 and furthermore, the percentage gap in Republican voting expands between rural and non-rural voters.

In several categories the increase in rural Republican voting in 2000 and the difference in Republican voting between rural and non-rural voters is remarkable. Consider a few examples. In the 18-29 age category the rural Republican vote goes from 48% in 1996 to 69% in 2000. The corresponding gap in Republican voting among rural versus non-rural voters in the 18-29 age range goes from 10 percentage points in 1996 to 25 percentage points in 2000. In the some college category the rural Republican vote goes from 50% in 1996 to 68% in 2000. The corresponding gap in Republican voting among rural versus non-rural voters in the some college category goes from 6 percentage points in 1996 to 20 percentage points in 2000. Other striking increases in the rural Republican vote in 2000 and a corresponding widening of the gap in Republican voting between rural and non-rural voters can be found among Hispanics, voters with family incomes from \$30,000 to \$75,000, unmarried voters, males, southerners, other Christians, and independents.

As a percentage of all voters, the portion of rural voters goes from 21% in 1996 to 23% in 2000 and then drops to 16% in 2004. With regard to Republican vote choice, among rural voters it jumps from 51% in 1996 to 61% in 2000. By contrast, the Republican vote registered by non-rural voters hardly moves—going from 44% in 1996 to 46% in 2000. In 2004 the rural Republican vote declines 1 percentage point (60%), but increases 4 percentage points among non-rural voters (50%).

These exit poll data illustrate the substantial differences in the characteristics of rural and non-rural voters and how these differences translate into vote choice in the 1992-2004 presidential elections. Equipped with the findings from Table 1, the analysis can be taken a step farther by considering additional characteristics and issues that are expected to distinguish rural and non-rural voters and reveal significant differences in the vote choice of rural voters.

Table 1. Characteristics of Rural and Non-Rural Voters, 1992-2004

Pres Elections	1992				1996				2000				2004			
	Rural	Non-Rural	Rural Vote	Non-Rural Vote	Rural	Non-Rural	Rural Vote	Non-Rural Vote	Rural	Non-Rural	Rural Vote	Non-Rural Vote	Rural	Non-Rural	Rural Vote	Non-Rural Vote
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>																
White	91	86	54	50	90	81	55	50	89	78	65	54	87	75	66	57
Black	6	9	14	10	7	11	19	12	5	11	17	8	8	12	9	11
Hispanic	1	3	27	29	2	5	14	24	4	7	45	35	4	9	48	45
<u>Age</u>																
18-29	17	22	47	43	15	18	48	38	15	17	69	44	16	17	55	44
30-44	36	36	54	46	28	34	53	45	29	34	64	47	27	29	61	52
45-59	24	23	51	49	26	26	50	45	31	28	62	47	30	30	63	49
60+	24	20	48	42	31	22	52	46	25	21	55	46	28	24	60	53
<u>Education</u>																
Less than HS	10	6	36	33	10	5	40	29	6	4	46	37	5	4	62	46
HS Grad	33	23	53	42	33	21	48	38	26	20	64	45	31	20	60	50
Some College	27	30	51	47	27	27	50	44	35	31	68	48	34	31	64	52
College Grad	18	25	52	51	20	27	60	50	20	25	59	52	19	27	58	53
Post-Grad Study	12	17	53	39	10	19	42	44	13	19	53	44	12	17	53	44
<u>Income</u>																
Less than \$30K	51	35	46	35	47	31	46	35	31	20	54	36	31	22	47	38
\$30K-\$75K	43	51	54	48	46	49	54	45	52	48	67	46	50	44	64	51
Over \$75K	6	14	65	56	7	21	65	55	17	31	62	54	19	34	69	56
<u>Married</u>																
Yes	73	64	54	50	73	64	55	50	72	63	65	52	68	62	68	56
No	28	36	44	36	27	36	45	34	29	37	56	37	32	38	45	40
<u>Gender</u>																
Male	48	47	51	47	48	48	55	49	50	47	68	52	46	46	64	54
Female	52	53	51	44	52	52	48	39	50	53	55	42	54	54	57	47

<u>Region</u>																
South	33	67	53	50	25	75	51	49	23	77	66	52	17	83	64	56
Non-South	26	74	49	44	19	81	51	42	23	78	60	44	16	84	58	47
<u>Religion</u>																
Protestant	52	38	60	53	50	35	55	55	43	32	66	56	41	30	70	61
Catholic	20	29	40	45	22	31	41	41	20	28	55	48	18	28	57	52
Other Christian	15	14	50	49	19	16	52	46	24	19	70	47	25	21	65	49
Jewish	0	5	NA	11	1	4	NA	17	1	4	NA	17	1	3	NA	25
Something Else	8	6	37	32	5	6	36	27	7	6	42	28	8	7	33	24
None	6	7	23	22	4	8	34	27	7	10	46	31	8	10	43	30
<u>Party ID</u>																
Republican	35	36	91	87	38	36	85	86	40	35	95	91	43	38	95	93
Independent	26	24	49	45	24	23	54	44	26	23	63	48	23	23	57	47
Democrat	39	40	16	10	39	42	16	9	34	42	22	9	35	39	20	9
<u>Ideology</u>																
Conservative	34	29	77	78	39	32	76	79	35	28	87	81	36	33	85	84
Moderate	48	49	44	39	47	47	40	36	49	51	55	43	46	45	55	43
Liberal	18	22	26	15	14	21	20	12	16	22	26	11	17	22	21	12
Total	24	76	50	45	21	80	51	44	23	77	61	46	16	84	60	50

SOURCE: Data were calculated from national exit polls: 1992 Voter Research and Surveys, 1996 Voter News Service, 2000 Voter News Service, and 2004 National Election Pool. Data are weighted. Entries are percentages rounded to the nearest 1 percent. Vote percentages are the Republican share of the two-party vote.

Social Issues and Clinton Fatigue

There is a strong perception that rural voters are markedly more conservative on social issues. With the use of survey data, several items can be examined to see whether rural voters differ from non-rural voters and how these items register with regard to vote choice. The social conservatism of rural voters may also account for the surge in Republican voting in 2000 because of a backlash towards the personal indiscretions of President Bill Clinton. Table 2 displays data on four topics that tap into social conservatism: (1) religion, (2) gun ownership, (3) gay issues, and (4) abortion. As shown in the table, only two questions were repeated in all four exit polls: (1) whether a voter is gay/lesbian and (2) one's position on abortion. Similar to Table 1, there are two columns for each election with the first displaying the distribution of responses from rural and non-rural voters and the second showing the Republican share of the two-party vote cast by rural and non-rural voters.

Beginning with a look at religion, in all categories a greater share of rural voters identify themselves as born again/evangelical, part of the religious right, white religious conservative⁸, white protestant conservative, and white evangelical. Also, rural voters attend religious services more frequently than non-rural voters. Generally, it also the case that rural voters are more Republican in their vote choice for every religious category. There are three exceptions: non-rural voters who are white religious conservatives, white protestant conservatives, and white evangelicals are slightly more Republican in their vote choice than rural voters. Republican voting among these groups is extraordinarily high and it is well known that conservative white Christians constitute a critical voting bloc within the Republican Party (Layman 2001).

The rural Republican vote among the religious right goes from 62% in 1996 to 77% in 2000. The corresponding gap in Republican voting among rural versus non-rural voters in the religious right category goes from 3 percentage points in 1996 to 13 percentage points in 2000. Finally, notice the substantial gap in Republican voting between rural and non-rural voters according to frequency of church attendance.

Rural voters are much more likely to own guns (54% vs. 33% in 1996, 70% vs. 41% in 2000, and 64% vs. 37% in 2004). Among gun owners the rural Republican vote increases from 58% in 1996 to 68% in 2000 to 70% in 2004. The corresponding gap in Republican voting among rural versus non-rural voters in the gun owner category goes from 1 percentage point in 1996 to 7 percentage points in 2000 to 9 percentage points in 2004. In 2000 the Voter News Service exit poll asked a question on gun control. Fifty-five percent of rural voters

⁸ White religious conservative identifies those voters who are white, attend religious services more than once a week, and are conservative.

Table 2. God, Guns, Gay Issues, and Abortion, 1992-2004

Pres Elections	1992				1996				2000				2004			
	Rural	Non-Rural	Rural Vote	Non-Rural Vote	Rural	Non-Rural	Rural Vote	Non-Rural Vote	Rural	Non-Rural	Rural Vote	Non-Rural Vote	Rural	Non-Rural	Rural Vote	Non-Rural Vote
<u>God</u>																
Born Again/Evang	14	9	70	62									47	32	74	63
Religious Right					31	20	62	59	26	18	77	64				
White Relig Cons													13	7	95	97
White Prot Cons													23	15	91	93
White Evangelicals													37	20	80	78
Attend > Once WK									18	14	77	59	22	15	75	62
Attend Once WK	26	20	64	54					30	28	68	56	27	26	69	57
Attend Few Month									14	15	56	45	12	14	57	50
Attend Few Year									28	29	56	40	25	29	50	44
Never									11	15	39	33	13	15	49	35
<u>Guns</u>																
Gun Owner					54	33	58	57	70	41	68	61	64	37	70	61
For Gun Control									45	68	39	35				
Oppose Gun Control									55	32	80	74				
<u>Gay Issues</u>																
Gay/Lesbian	2	2	33	13	3	6	40	23	2	4	33	26	3	4	36	21
Gay Friend/Relative	5	7	45	34												
For Gay Marriage													20	27	25	22
For Civil Unions													27	38	53	53
Oppose Recognition													53	35	78	68
<u>Abortion</u>																
All cases legal	25	39	30	25	17	28	25	23	18	26	36	24	18	22	32	25
Most cases legal	32	31	42	43	31	38	35	38	29	36	46	38	31	36	44	37
Most cases illegal	31	22	68	68	33	24	63	64	34	27	75	69	32	26	80	72
All cases illegal	12	9	76	70	19	11	75	74	20	12	84	73	20	16	80	77

SOURCE: Same as Table 1.

opposed greater restrictions on gun ownership whereas sixty-eight percent of non-rural voters supported more restrictions on gun ownership. Rural Republican voting exceeded non-rural Republican voting among both opponents and supporters of gun control.

With regard to gay issues, the percentage of rural and non-rural voters who are gay/lesbian is very small and thus the numbers have to be considered with caution. A higher percentage of non-rural voters claim to be gay. It is interesting to note that among gay/lesbian voters, those who reside in rural areas are considerably more Republican in their vote choice. In 2004 the National Election Pool exit poll asked a question on gay marriage, a prominent campaign issue. Rural voters were much less supportive of gay marriage, with 53% opposed versus 35% of non-rural voters opposed to gay marriage. Among supporters of gay marriage, rural voters were slightly more Republican (25% vs. 22%). For supporters of civil unions, rural and non-rural voters registered the same Republican vote share (53%). But among those who opposed gay marriage, rural voters were considerably more Republican in their vote choice (78% vs. 68%).

The abortion question was asked in the same form for all four presidential elections. The question includes an extreme pro-choice (legal in all cases) and an extreme pro-life (illegal in all cases) response, a response that leans pro-choice (legal in most cases), and a response that leans pro-life (illegal in most cases). Focusing just on the extreme responses, in every election a higher percentage of non-rural voters are pro-choice and a higher percentage of rural voters are pro-life. Within the two extreme positions rural voters are more Republican in their vote choice for every election. Notice in particular the differences in Republican voting between 1996 and 2000. Extreme pro-choice rural voters were 25% Republican in 1996 and increase to 36% Republican in 2000. The corresponding gap in Republican voting among rural versus non-rural voters in the extreme pro-choice category goes from 2 percentage points in 1996 to 12 percentage points in 2000. Similarly, extreme pro-life rural voters go from 75% Republican in 1996 to 84% Republican in 2000. The corresponding gap in Republican voting among rural versus non-rural voters in the extreme pro-life category goes from 1 percentage point in 1996 to 11 percentage points in 2000.

Table 2 provides strong evidence for the greater social conservatism of rural voters and in most cases this translates into a higher rate of Republican voting among rural voters when compared to non-rural voters. As mentioned previously, because of the greater social conservatism of rural voters it is worth considering whether this electorate suffered a more severe bout of Clinton fatigue in the 2000 presidential election.

The Voter News Service exit poll included several questions regarding the impact of Bill Clinton on the 2000 presidential election. Table 3 lists six questions directly concerning Bill Clinton, three questions that implicitly relate to the effect

of Bill Clinton, and a question regarding the 1996 presidential vote. Adhering to the research design in Tables 1 and 2, the first column presents the distribution of responses from rural and non-rural voters and the second shows the Republican share of the two-party vote cast by rural and non-rural voters.

For all six Clinton questions, compared to non-rural voters, rural voters are much more negative towards the former president. For example, for the survey question that combines job approval with personal favorability, in the category of disapprove of Clinton's job performance and unfavorable toward Clinton as a person—53% of rural voters chose this response—versus only 37% of non-rural voters. Turning to vote choice, among those who gave the most negative response toward the former president, rural voters always register a higher Republican vote percentage. In four out of the six Clinton questions, rural voters who gave the most negative response voted at least 90% Republican. Rural voters with a bad case of Clinton fatigue handsomely rewarded George W. Bush in 2000.

The next three questions do not mention Bill Clinton explicitly, but they clearly emphasize retrospective voting. Versus non-rural voters, rural voters place a greater value on moral leadership, thought the moral climate of the country was on the wrong track, and thought the country could use a fresh start. When these three positions are examined with respect to vote choice, there is a chasm between the Republican vote registered by rural and non-rural voters: (1) Ability to provide moral leadership: Republican vote is 84% for rural voters and 67% for non-rural voters (2) Seriously off on the wrong (moral) track: Republican vote is 78% for rural voters and 61% for non-rural voters (3) The country needs a fresh start: Republican vote is 86% for rural voters and 71% for non-rural voters.

The last question in Table 3 concerns the 1996 presidential vote. Not surprisingly, in the 1996 presidential election rural voters were more likely to vote Republican than were non-rural voters (37% vs. 30%), but a plurality of rural and non-rural voters recalled supporting the Democratic Party (40% vs. 48%). The same percentage of rural and non-rural voters abstained from voting in the 1996 election (13%). With respect to vote choice, notice that among voters who supported the Democratic Party in 1996, rural voters were 10 percentage points more likely than non-rural voters to support the Republican Party in 2000 (24% vs. 14%). Also, among Perot voters in 1996, rural voters were substantially more Republican in 2000 (83% vs. 65%). Finally, among those voters who sat out the 1996 presidential election, rural voters were much more Republican than non-rural voters in the 2000 election (67% vs. 51%).

Table 3. Clinton Fatigue was more Severe among Rural Voters

Survey Question	2000 Presidential Election			
	Rural	Non-Rural	Rural Vote	Non-Rural Vote
<u>Clinton job approval</u>				
Approve	47	62	26	19
Disapprove	53	39	93	90
<u>Clinton as a person</u>				
Favorable	29	41	16	13
Unfavorable	71	60	81	70
<u>Clinton job approval and personal favorability</u>				
Approve/Favorable	27	39	13	12
Approve/Unfavorable	19	22	43	32
Disapprove/Favorable	2	2	65	51
Disapprove/Unfavorable	53	37	94	92
<u>Clinton admin. scandals important to vote</u>				
Very Important	32	23	90	78
Somewhat Important	22	20	78	69
Not Too Important	14	19	51	36
Not at all Important	33	39	30	18
<u>Was one reason for your vote today:</u>				
To express support for Bill Clinton	7	11	2	5
To express opposition to Bill Clinton	23	17	97	94
Bill Clinton was not a factor	70	72	54	41
<u>History will remember Bill Clinton:</u>				
More for his leadership	24	31	14	14
More for his scandals	76	69	79	61
<u>Which is more important in a president?</u>				
Ability to manage the government	59	65	48	33
Ability to provide moral leadership	42	35	84	67
<u>Moral climate of the country today</u>				
Generally going in the right direction	36	42	37	26
Seriously off on the wrong track	64	58	78	61
<u>Which do you agree with more?</u>				
The country needs a fresh start	47	42	86	71
The country needs to stay on course	53	58	43	27
<u>1996 presidential vote</u>				
Bill Clinton-Democrat	40	48	24	14
Bob Dole-Republican	37	30	94	93
Ross Perot/Other	11	9	83	65
Did not vote for president in 1996	13	13	67	51

SOURCE: Data were calculated from the 2000 Voter News Service national exit poll. Data are weighted. Entries are percentages rounded to the nearest 1 percent. Vote percentages are the Republican share of the two-party vote.

Voter Differences and Vote Choice in the 2000 and 2004 Presidential Elections

Multivariate analyses can reveal the differences between rural and non-rural voters, and whether rural residents had a greater likelihood of voting Republican in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections. Now that numerous differences between rural and non-rural voters have been examined, the next step is: (1) to use multiple regressions to see which differences are significant between rural and non-rural voters, and (2) employ the same control variables to determine if rural residents were more likely to vote Republican in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections.

Multivariate logistic regressions are conducted for the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, respectively. Each regression evaluates the differences between rural and non-rural voters. The dependent variable for each regression is coded 1 = rural voter and 0 = non-rural voter. The logistic regression estimates and their standard errors are presented for each election year. In addition, I present the maximum difference in the probability of being a rural voter for each statistically significant coefficient when setting the other control variables at their means.

All of the variables presented in Table 1 are included in the regressions.⁹ In addition, frequency of church attendance is included in all regressions.¹⁰ In the regressions for the 2000 presidential election, additional variables include a dummy for religious right, the abortion question, and a variable that assesses Clinton fatigue—the combined job approval and personal favorability of the ex-president. In the regressions for the 2004 presidential election, additional variables include evangelical/born again, three separate dummies for the most important issue facing the country (moral values, terrorism, and Iraq), and job approval of President Bush.¹¹

Table 4 presents the regression estimates for the 2000 presidential election. The first column displays the estimates for the likelihood of being a rural voter. Rural voters are more likely to be white, less educated, lower income, married, Christian, opposed to abortion, more negative toward President Clinton, and less

⁹ In some cases the coding for the variables is slightly altered (e.g., family income consists of six categories in 2000 and 8 categories in 2004; the religion variable is adjusted so that a dummy is created which combines Protestant, Catholic, and Other Christian into 1 [Christian] and collapses Jewish, Something Else, and None into 0).

¹⁰ Unfortunately, some of the variables that I wanted to include in these regressions such as gun owner, position on gun control, abortion (in 2004), and position on gay marriage, drop out of the analyses when included in a regression because of a lack of variation in the response and/or an insufficient number of cases when included in a multiple regression.

¹¹ Approval of President Bush's job performance is a four category question: strongly disapprove, somewhat disapprove, somewhat approve, and strongly approve.

Table 4. Rural vs. Non-Rural Voter Differences in the 2000 Presidential Election

Variables	Rural vs. Non-Rural Voter (1 = Rural Voter, 0 = Non-Rural Voter)	Maximum Difference in Probability of being a Rural Voter
<u>Demographics</u>		
White	0.813 (0.116)***	+0.1085
Age	-0.037 (0.037)	—
Education	-0.063 (0.036) [±]	-0.0395
Income	-0.385 (0.031)***	-0.3113
Married	0.629 (0.086)***	+0.0921
Male	0.094 (0.073)	—
South	-0.007 (0.081)	—
<u>Religion</u>		
Christian	0.336 (0.115)**	+0.0489
Religious Right	0.012 (0.096)	—
Church Attendance	0.003 (0.034)	—
Abortion	0.120 (0.045)**	+0.0570
<u>Clinton Fatigue</u>		
Disapprove of Job/Person	0.238 (0.036)***	+0.1117
<u>Political Characteristics</u>		
Party Identification	-0.193 (0.055)***	-0.0599
Ideology	0.026 (0.062)	—
Constant	-1.641 (0.219)***	—
Log Likelihood	-2394.749	
Pseudo R ²	.086	
Cases	4,938	

SOURCE: Data are from the 2000 Voter News Service national exit poll. Entries are logistic regression estimates with standard errors in parentheses. Data are weighted.

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05, [±]p<.10; two-tailed test.

likely to be Republican.¹² The second column in Table 4 presents the maximum difference in the likelihood of being a rural voter for each of the statistically significant variables when setting all of the remaining variables at their means.

For example, in the case of family income, compared to respondents whose annual incomes are under \$15,000, respondents with a yearly income over \$100,000 are .31 less likely to be a rural voter. Likewise, compared to non-whites, the probability of being a rural voter among white respondents is higher by a difference of .11. We also see that Clinton fatigue was more likely among rural voters, with a maximum difference in the likelihood of being a rural voter equal to a probability of .11 for this variable. Finally, the probability of being a rural voter is greater among the married (+.09), Christians (+.05), and those most strongly opposed to abortion (+.06), whereas the more educated (-.04) and Republican identifiers (-.06) have a lower probability of being rural voters.

Table 5 presents the regression estimates for the 2004 presidential election. The first column shows that the likelihood of being a rural voter is much greater among whites, the less educated, lower income voters, married voters, northerners, evangelical/born-again voters, and voters who approve of President Bush's job performance. It is interesting to note that there is a regional distinction in the likelihood of being a rural voter. In addition, rural voters tend to have a more favorable impression of President Bush—a factor that greatly contributes to the Republican vote in 2004.

Despite some differences in the variables included in the 2004 regression¹³, the second column in Table 5 again shows that the probability of being a rural voter is considerably greater among whites (+.09) and the married (+.07), whereas the probability of being a rural voter is significantly lower among respondents with higher educations (-.06) and higher family incomes (-.23). Southerners are slightly less likely to be rural voters (-.03). Finally, those respondents identifying themselves as evangelical or born-again Christians are more likely to be rural voters by a probability of .06, and those most approving of President Bush were more likely to be rural voters as compared to those least approving by a probability of .03.

The next step in these analyses is to evaluate vote choice in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, respectively, when including rural voters as an explanatory variable in addition to the same set of control variables presented in the last two models (Tables 4 and 5). Since the first two regressions revealed which factors are significant in affecting the likelihood of being a rural voter, these next two models will determine if rural voters are still more likely to vote Republican given the presence of multiple factors that distinguish rural residents from non-rural

¹² The party identification variable is coded 1 = Democrat, 2 = Independent, and 3 = Republican.

¹³ Please note that since the explanatory variables differ in the 2000 and 2004 regressions, I am not attempting to make explicit statistical comparisons across election years.

Table 5. Rural vs. Non-Rural Voter Differences in the 2004 Presidential Election

Variables	Rural vs. Non-Rural Voter (1 = Rural Voter, 0 = Non-Rural Voter)	Maximum Difference in Probability of being a Rural Voter
<u>Demographics</u>		
White	1.027 (0.130)***	+0.0944
Age	0.042 (0.041)	—
Education	-0.133 (0.040)***	-0.0632
Income	-0.307 (0.030)***	-0.2295
Married	0.603 (0.096)***	+0.0656
Male	0.103 (0.082)	—
South	-0.310 (0.095)***	-0.0337
<u>Religion</u>		
Christian	-0.094 (0.120)	—
Evangelical/Born-Again	0.527 (0.096)***	+0.0643
Church Attendance	0.044 (0.037)	—
<u>Most Important Issues</u>		
Moral Values	0.038 (0.116)	—
Terrorism	-0.096 (0.124)	—
Iraq	-0.083 (0.128)	—
Bush Approval	0.086 (0.050) [±]	+0.0297
<u>Political Characteristics</u>		
Party Identification	-0.062 (0.067)	—
Ideology	0.003 (0.070)	—
Constant	-1.771 (0.244)***	—
Log Likelihood	-2017.104	
Pseudo R ²	.080	
Cases	5,020	

SOURCE: Data are from the 2004 National Election Pool exit poll. Entries are logistic regression estimates with standard errors in parentheses. Data are weighted.

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05, [±]p<.10; two-tailed test.

residents. Is it the case that place (rural vs. non-rural) exhibits an independent effect on vote choice even after controlling for a host of factors (demography, religion, issues, presidential approval, and political attitudes) that are expected to account for much of the variance in voter preferences? The vote choice regressions for 2000 and 2004 show that the answer is a resounding yes: Rural voters were much more likely to vote Republican in these presidential contests, even after controlling for several other significant explanatory variables.

Table 6 presents the logistic regression results for the 2000 vote choice model. Most of the independent variables affect the likelihood of voting Republican. In fact, only three coefficients fail to attain statistical significance: (1) married, (2) religious right, and (3) frequency of church attendance. For several variables, the maximum differences in the probability of voting Republican are enormous: +.67 for Republicans versus Democrats, +.66 for those disapproving of Clinton's job performance and as a person versus those approving of Clinton on both counts, +.42 for Conservatives versus Liberals, and +.28 for those who oppose abortions in all cases versus those who approve of the practice in all cases. To a lesser degree, whites (+.18), higher income voters (+.14), southerners (+.14), males (+.10), and Christians (+.09) were more supportive of the GOP. By contrast, age (-.09) and education (-.14) reduced the probability of voting Republican. Finally, compared to non-rural voters, rural voters were .09 more likely to vote Republican in the 2000 presidential election. Setting the other variables at their means, the probability of voting Republican in the 2000 presidential election is .63 for rural voters and .54 for non-rural voters.¹⁴

¹⁴ I also ran a multiple regression on vote choice in the 2000 presidential election that included interactions between rural voters and each of the other variables shown in the model for Table 6. In this model, two interactions were significant: (1) rural voter X age, and (2) rural voter X Clinton fatigue. First, at every category of age (18-29, 30-44, 45-59, 60 and over), rural voters were significantly less likely to vote Republican (a maximum difference in probability equal to -.35). Second, demonstrating again the Clinton effect on the 2000 presidential election, for every category of Clinton fatigue rural voters were much more likely to vote Republican (a maximum difference in probability equal to +.22).

Table 6. The Likelihood of Voting Republican in the 2000 Presidential Election

Variables	Republican Vote in 2000 (1 = Republican, 0 = Democratic)	Maximum Difference in Probability of Voting Republican in 2000
Rural Voter	0.371 (0.133)**	+0.0902
<u>Demographics</u>		
White	0.715 (0.152)***	+0.1769
Age	-0.116 (0.056)*	-0.0854
Education	-0.146 (0.053)**	-0.1421
Income	0.116 (0.044)**	+0.1423
Married	-0.196 (0.122)	—
Male	0.421 (0.109)***	+0.1033
South	0.589 (0.122)***	+0.1419
<u>Religion</u>		
Christian	0.377 (0.152)*	+0.0937
Religious Right	0.016 (0.163)	—
Church Attendance	0.060 (0.050)	—
Abortion	0.386 (0.066)***	+0.2758
<u>Clinton Fatigue</u>		
Disapprove of Job/Person	1.076 (0.046)***	+0.6607
<u>Political Characteristics</u>		
Party Identification	1.636 (0.072)***	+0.6672
Ideology	0.900 (0.091)***	+0.4200
Constant	-9.469 (0.385)***	—
Log Likelihood	-1189.276	
Pseudo R ²	.634	
Cases	4,683	

SOURCE: Data are from the 2000 Voter News Service national exit poll. Entries are logistic regression estimates with standard errors in parentheses. Data are weighted.

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05, †p<.10; two-tailed test.

Table 7 presents the logistic regression results for the 2004 vote choice model. In this model, five of the explanatory variables fail to attain statistical significance: (1) education, (2) married, (3) evangelical/born-again, (4) frequency of church attendance, and (5) Iraq as the most important issue. The most influential variables in terms of the maximum difference in the probability of voting Republican are: +.93 for those who strongly approve of President Bush versus those who strongly disapprove, +.62 for Republicans versus Democrats, +.49 for those who considered terrorism the most important issue versus those who did not, +.47 for those who considered moral values¹⁵ the most important issue versus those who did not, +.30 for Conservatives versus Liberals, and +.24 for those in the highest family income category versus those in the lowest.

Among the remaining statistically significant variables, the effect of being a rural voter on the likelihood of voting Republican (+.17) was second only to race (white equals +.19). Thus, in 2004 the distinction of place (rural vs. non-rural) had a greater impact on vote choice than religion (Christian equals +.15), the gender gap (male equals +.11), age (+.10: 18-29 years old versus 60 years and older), and region (South equals +.09).

¹⁵ It is worth pointing out the remarkably large effect of the moral values variable on the likelihood of a rural voter supporting the GOP in the 2004 election. A multiple regression model (not shown) of vote choice in 2004 that only includes rural voters with the same explanatory variables presented in Table 5, shows that the moral values dummy is highly significant. Setting the other variables at their means, among rural voters who did not consider moral values the most important issue, their likelihood of voting Republican was .71. By contrast, for those rural voters who considered moral values the most important issue, their likelihood of voting Republican was .98. In the aftermath of the 2004 presidential election, the media and scholars (see Hillygus and Shields 2005) alike, devoted considerable attention to the moral values survey response item. Granted the response is amorphous: What exactly does one mean by moral values? Nonetheless, it is also apparent from numerous survey items that rural voters are more socially conservative (For instance, among rural voters the correlation between ideology [1 = Liberal, 2 = Moderate, 3 = Conservative] and the moral values dummy is .254, $p < .01$, two-tailed test). Indeed, by crafting a vague response option, rural voters may have been more sincere in responding to this question. Social desirability often becomes an impediment to the registering of sincere responses to survey items, but by presenting a vague question, voters may have been more inclined to acknowledge the importance of a response item that serves as an umbrella under which one can lump a whole range of specific issues (i.e., gay marriage, abortion, prayer in school, etc.). The fact is that we will never know exactly what voters thought of when they chose moral values as the most important issue facing the country. Even so, it jibes with an understanding of the political behavior of rural voters that the moral values response had a very large impact on their likelihood of voting Republican.

Table 7. The Likelihood of Voting Republican in the 2004 Presidential Election

Variables	Republican Vote in 2004 (1 = Republican, 0 = Democratic)	Maximum Difference in Probability of Voting Republican in 2004
Rural Voter	0.701 (0.204)***	+0.1706
<u>Demographics</u>		
White	0.769 (0.194)***	+0.1878
Age	0.139 (0.078) [±]	+0.1039
Education	-0.030 (0.075)	—
Income	0.142 (0.052)**	+0.2430
Married	0.122 (0.166)	—
Male	0.433 (0.149)**	+0.1077
South	0.373 (0.180)*	+0.0927
<u>Religion</u>		
Christian	0.600 (0.210)**	+0.1477
Evangelical/Born-Again	0.122 (0.185)	—
Church Attendance	0.100 (0.069)	—
<u>Most Important Issues</u>		
Moral Values	2.207 (0.212)***	+0.4681
Terrorism	2.379 (0.212)***	+0.4853
Iraq	0.259 (0.204)	—
Bush Approval	2.196 (0.090)***	+0.9273
<u>Political Characteristics</u>		
Party Identification	1.447 (0.101)***	+0.6189
Ideology	0.610 (0.124)***	+0.2958
Constant	-13.186 (0.593)***	—
Log Likelihood	-662.278	
Pseudo R ²	.807	
Cases	4,965	

SOURCE: Data are from the 2004 National Election Pool exit poll. Entries are logistic regression estimates with standard errors in parentheses. Data are weighted.

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05, [±]p<.10; two-tailed test.

Setting the other variables at their means, the probability of voting Republican in the 2004 presidential election is .65 for rural voters and .48 for non-rural voters.¹⁶

The regression results for the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections shed considerable light on the political behavior of rural voters in terms of what distinguishes them from non-rural voters, and also what accounts for the variation in Republican voting in models that include rural voters as an explanatory variable. Across a range of demographic, religious, political, and election-specific indicators, rural voters differ from non-rural voters. Further, after controlling for other factors, rural residents were more likely to vote Republican in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections.

Conclusion

This research on the voting behavior of rural voters in recent presidential elections documents and evaluates the many differences between rural and non-rural voters, and accounts for several of the factors leading to an increase in rural Republican voting in 2000 and 2004. The conventional wisdom that rural voters are more likely to be so-called values voters is true and this translates into greater Republican support. Further, on virtually every survey item in which their non-rural counterparts share the same survey response, rural voters are consistently more Republican in their presidential vote choice. Dissatisfaction with President Clinton—termed Clinton fatigue, was much more pronounced among rural voters and this was a major reason for the strong rural shift in favor of the Republican Party in 2000.

Despite their small size relative to the rest of the American electorate (see Table 1), it behooves presidential candidates to pay close attention to the concerns of rural voters. By neutralizing the rural vote, Bill Clinton won two presidential terms whereas George W. Bush was twice victorious because his lower non-rural support was offset by a landslide share of the rural vote. Most of the characteristics that distinguish rural voters from non-rural voters also influence vote choice and this speaks to the importance of identity politics. That is,

¹⁶ I also ran a multiple regression on vote choice in the 2004 presidential election that included interactions between rural voters and each of the other variables shown in the model for Table 7. In this model, three interactions were significant: (1) rural voter X income, (2) rural voter X Christian, and (3) rural voter X church attendance. First, at every category of family income, rural voters were significantly more likely to vote Republican (a maximum difference in probability equal to +.48). Second, reinforcing the evidence that rural voters are more likely to be values voters, rural Christians were more likely to vote Republican than non-rural Christians (a difference in probability equal to +.30). Finally, compared to their non-rural counterparts, rural voters with more frequent church attendance were more likely to vote Republican (a maximum difference in probability equal to +.36).

candidates who share the characteristics and/or values of rural voters are much better positioned to gain their support (Popkin 1991).

2008 marks the first time in over fifty years (since 1952) that a presidential contest has neither an incumbent nor sitting vice president seeking the White House. Currently, the early frontrunners (Democrats Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama, Republicans Rudy Giuliani and John McCain) do not appear to possess the characteristics or values that would attract strong rural support. However, two candidates who are very much in the running, Democrat John Edwards and Republican Mitt Romney¹⁷, may end up securing their party's nominations because their stances on social issues reward them with a disproportionate share of the rural vote. On the other hand, because the 2008 election is truly open, at this early date we might still have yet to see the entry of the candidate who becomes the next president. Most likely though, rural voters will again play an important role in presidential politics.¹⁸

¹⁷ There has been much discussion about Mitt Romney being unpalatable to religious conservatives because of his Mormon faith, but it is also true that viability may trump this and Romney has attracted early support from many religious conservatives because he emphasizes his agreement on values issues (see Bushman 2007; Linker 2007). As for John Edwards, his southern roots naturally present him as more socially conservative vis-à-vis Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama—even though Edwards may in fact be more liberal on economic and defense issues, (e.g., his proposal for universal healthcare, raising taxes on the wealthiest Americans, and his proposal of a complete withdrawal of American troops in Iraq within the next 12 to 18 months (<http://johnedwards.com/about/issues/>)).

¹⁸ It is apparent that rural voters can now be viewed as swing voters. A recent poll (5/31/07-6/5/07) of rural voters commissioned by the Center for Rural Strategies (<http://gqrr.com/index.php?ID=1999>) indicates that rural voters are split in their current political support of the Democratic and Republican parties. Working against the GOP is the Bush administration's handling of the Iraq War and declining economic opportunity and prosperity in rural communities. The Republican Party maintains a strong advantage with regard to values issues. At the general election stage, among rural voters, the ideal presidential candidate would appeal to economic concerns, commit to improving the situation in Iraq, and promote conservative positions on social issues. Because the parties will most likely nominate candidates who differ in their approaches to the three aforementioned positions, the rural vote will be more evenly divided between the parties in 2008.

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