

# City vs. Country: How Where We Live Deepens the Nation's Political Divide

## Differences Between Rural and Urban America Are Underappreciated Factor in Political Split

EL DORADO SPRINGS, Mo.—The owner of the nicest restaurant in town doesn't serve alcohol, worried that his pastor would be disappointed if he did. Public schools try to avoid scheduling events on Wednesday evenings, when churches hold Bible study. And Democrats here are a rare and lonely breed.

Older, nearly 100% white and overwhelmingly Republican, El Dorado Springs is typical of what is now small-town America. Coffee costs 90 cents at the diner, with free refills. Two hours north and a world away in Kansas City, Starbucks charges twice that, and voters routinely elect Democrats.

There have always been differences between rural and urban America, but they have grown vast and deep, and now are an underappreciated factor in dividing the U.S. political system, say politicians and academicians.

Polling, consumer data and demographic profiles paint a picture of two Americas—not just with differing proclivities but different life experiences. People in cities are more likely to be tethered to a smartphone, buy a foreign-made car and read a fashion magazine. Those in small towns are more likely to go to church, own a gun, support the military and value community ties.

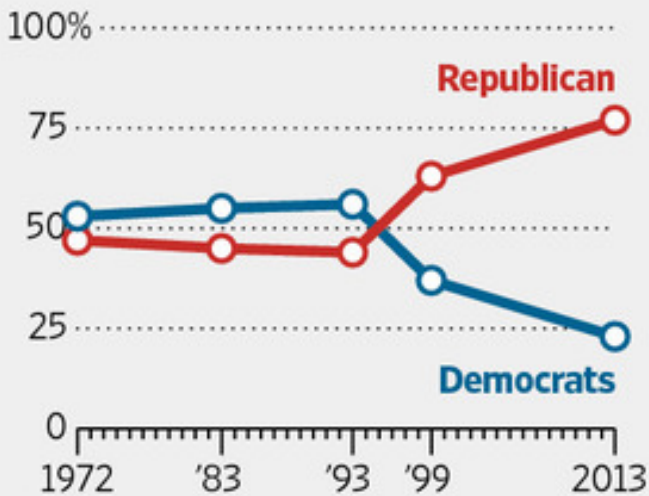
In many ways, the split between red Republican regions and blue Democratic ones—and their opposing views about the role of government—is an extension of the cultural divide between rural Americans and those living in cities and suburbs.

As Democrats have come to dominate U.S. cities, it is Republican strength in rural areas that allows the party to hold control of the House and remain competitive in presidential elections.

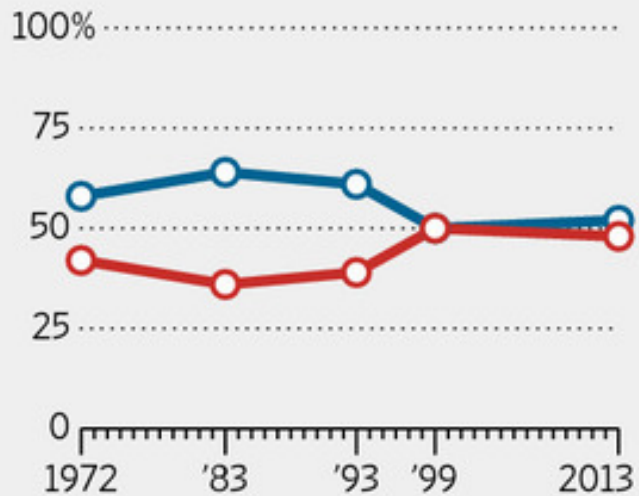
# A House Divided

Over the past 15 years the percentage of rural Americans represented by Republicans in the House has grown sharply, while urban Americans have shifted slightly to House Democrats.

## Rural



## Urban



Source: WSJ analysis of Census Bureau data

The Wall Street Journal

"The difference in this country is not red versus blue," said Neil Levesque, director of the New Hampshire Institute of Politics at Saint Anselm College. "It's urban versus rural."

El Dorado Springs, the largest town in Cedar County, is in Republican country. Cedar County gave 72% of its votes to [Mitt Romney](#) in 2012.

The town sits in Missouri's fourth congressional district, represented in the House of Representatives by Republican Vicky Hartzler, a farmer who made her name opposing same-sex marriage in Missouri. She titled her how-to-campaign book, "Running God's Way."

The neighboring fifth congressional district encompasses Kansas City, a Democratic Party bastion represented by Rep. Emanuel Cleaver, a black incumbent in his fifth term. Three in 10 of his constituents are minorities, and Jackson County, where Kansas City sits, gave Mr. Romney just 39% of its vote.



Sarah L. Starnes, with her husband and son, says she has encountered few negative reactions being married to a black man in Kansas City. 'In the city, we have more density, we're exposed to people who are different from us. We see them on a day to day basis and how similar we really are,' she says.

*Catalin Abagiu for The Wall Street Journal*

The U.S. divide wasn't always this stark. For decades, rural America was part of the Democratic base, and as recently as 1993, just over half of rural Americans were represented by a House Democrat, according to a Wall Street Journal analysis. Conservative Democrats often represented rural districts, including Ms. Hartzler's predecessor, Ike Skelton, who held the seat for 34 years before she ousted him in 2010.

That parity eventually gave way to GOP dominance. In 2013, 77% of rural Americans were represented by a House Republican. But in urban areas—which by the government's definition includes both cities and suburbs—slightly less than half of residents were represented by congressional Republicans, despite the GOP's 30-seat majority in the House.

The urban-rural divide has also grown in presidential contests. In 1992, Democrat Bill Clinton beat Republican George Bush in the 50 densest counties—the most urban in the country—by 25 percentage points. By 2012, Democrat [Barack Obama](#)'s advantage in those urban counties had shot up to 38 points, according to a Journal analysis of Census and election data.

Today, almost all big cities, even those in red states such as Missouri, Indiana and Texas, favor Democrats for president.

The shift in rural areas has been even more dramatic. In 1992, Mr. Bush won the 50 least-dense counties—the most rural in the country—by 18 points. In 2012, Mr. Romney's advantage there had roughly tripled, to 53 points.

[View Graphics](#)

## How Rural and Urban America Compare

Population

**13,799**

**677,377**

Change in population,  
April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2012

▼ **1.3%**

▲ **0.5%**

Persons per household, 2008-2012

👤 **2.25**

👤 **2.45**

Median household income, 2008-2012

**\$31,677**

**\$47,023**

Retail sales per capita, 2007

**\$8,694**

**\$12,347**



David Wasserman, who analyzes politics at the Cook Political Report, measures the change by examining how Democratic presidential candidates performed in counties with a [Whole Foods WFM +1.34%](#)—the upscale grocery store that stocks organic goods—and in counties with a Cracker Barrel, the homestyle restaurant featuring chicken n' dumplings.

In 1992, Bill Clinton won 60% of the Whole Foods counties and 40% of the Cracker Barrel counties, a 20-point difference. That gap that has widened every year since, and in 2012, Mr. Obama won 77% of Whole Foods counties and 29% of Cracker Barrel Counties, a 48-point difference.

"Politics hangs on culture and lifestyle more than policy," Mr. Wasserman said.

These divisions emerged in the 1960s with the Civil Rights movement and the rise of such social issues as abortion and school prayer, which distanced culturally conservative rural voters from the Democratic Party.

Religion remains a dividing line. Urban dwellers are more than three times as likely as rural residents to say religion is "not that important to me," according to a recent Wall Street Journal/NBC poll. Nearly 60% of rural residents say homosexual behavior is a sin compared with 40% of city residents, a Pew Research Center poll found last year.

Economic forces have advanced the split. Companies carefully choose where to locate new stores and who to target with advertising, assisted by a trove of marketing data. The result is rural Americans have a different set of consumer choices than urban residents.

For example, rural residents are 47% more likely to shop at a [Dollar General DG +0.75%](#) store than is an average American, according to surveys by the research firm Experian Marketing Services.

City dwellers are 41% more likely to buy something at an Apple store, 74% at a J. Crew and 69% at Williams-Sonoma, according to Experian. All three chains are in Kansas City; none are in El Dorado Springs.

Rural economies have faltered as automated farming and corporate ventures subsumed many family farms. Cutbacks in manufacturing have cost jobs, and fewer jobs mean fewer opportunities for young people, driving away those with more skills and education.

Without new arrivals, these aging regions have grown more insulated from cultural change—whether the use of smartphones or the acceptance of same-sex marriage.



Jackson Tough, with his daughter on a hunting trip, is executive director of the El Dorado Springs Chamber of Commerce and says he is amazed by gun control measures in other parts of the U.S.

'People in a more urban setting look down upon having guns, and we think it's just part of being normal,' he says.

*Catalin Abagiu for The Wall Street Journal*

"We're the gun-toting, God-loving folks they claim us to be," said Jackson Tough, age 45, the executive director of the El Dorado Springs Chamber of Commerce. He owns more than 20 guns for hunting and target shooting.

El Dorado is surrounded by lush farm land where the Ozark Mountains meet the western plains. There are no chain stores beyond a couple of fast-food franchises and a Dollar General store.

The town is bisected by a four-lane highway that passes a [McDonald's MCD -0.51%](#) and DairiConcepts, a cheese-product maker and El Dorado's largest employer. The diner, Scooters, bears little resemblance to its big-city counterparts: prices are lower and the air is filled with cigarette smoke banned in urban eateries.

The historic downtown has a park with a bandstand for summer concerts, and a spot to taste the spring waters that attracted early settlers. But across Main Street sits one vacant storefront after the next.

The population of about 3,600 has held roughly steady for the past several decades, but the town has shrunk.

El Dorado used to have two grocery stores until one bought the other and closed it. The county hospital stopped delivering babies in 2012 because there weren't enough deliveries to justify keeping an on-call surgeon. A bond issue to upgrade aging school facilities was twice rejected by voters.

The historic Opera House Theater, the only one in town, can't show movies until supporters raise \$60,000 for a digital projector. So far, they have \$13,000.

With few jobs waiting for young people after college, adults in town assume most won't return to start their own families after graduation. The exodus has left the town older and more conservative.

Ben Vickers, age 17, is a local high school star, participating in band, choir, quiz bowl, theater, speech and debate. Ben loves the farm where he grew up but longs for a city—a place, he said, where he will find more points of view and more people who support Mr. Obama, as he does.

"In El Dorado Springs, you're either a teacher, you work at a gas station, you work at a restaurant, most likely McDonald's or Sonic," he said.

Still, Ben and other residents appreciate their community ties. High-school teacher Tracy Barger recalled how after her 16-year-old son died in a car accident in 2012, four pastors were at the hospital that night. Later, she said, "one of the banks in town brought us a lunch. We don't even bank there."

Given the sagging local economy, residents were excited in 2011 when the El Dorado Mexican Restaurant and Cantina planned to open. But in a town that supports more than 30 churches and one bar, some people objected to the restaurant's application for a liquor license.



Joe Trussell is pastor of the Church of God (Holiness), the largest church in El Dorado Springs. He has traveled to many parts of the world but says, 'A lot of people here, if they get out of Cedar County it's like they've been to another country.' In his office is a trophy of a deer he shot himself.  
*Catalin Abagiu for The Wall Street Journal*

Three local pastors urged the city council to reject the request. "Very little good comes from alcohol," said Joe Trussell, 54, pastor of the Church of God (Holiness). The council approved the application on a 3-2 vote.

At the Rusty Jug, a barbecue restaurant decorated like an old-West saloon, owner Todd Leonard suspects beer sales could help his shaky bottom line. But home-brewed root beer remains the strongest drink on tap for diners enjoying the deep-fried ribs and deep-fried potato salad.

Mr. Leonard, age 45, is afraid one of his customers might drive home drunk and kill someone if he served alcohol, he said. He also worries his pastor and neighbors might lose respect for him.



Todd Leonard doesn't sell alcohol at his Rusty Jug barbecue restaurant in El Dorado because many neighbors think it would be wrong. 'Being in a small town, we have this understanding of knowing that everybody's going to act the same way,' he says. 'And if you get out of that cookie-cutter position, they'll let you know that that's not how we feel it should be.'

*Catalin Abagiu for The Wall Street Journal*

"I am Todd Leonard. I've lived here all my life," he said. " 'Todd has always done things right.' That's the image I portray."

Over the summer, Mr. Leonard's church voted overwhelmingly to spell out opposition to homosexuality in its bylaws. The purpose was to protect the church from any lawsuit if it someday fired someone because they were gay, Mr. Trussell said.

"We're a church that does embrace people and we love people regardless of their circumstances," Mr. Trussell said. But, he added, "We believe this behavior goes against the Bible."

In Kansas City, at the Country Club Congregational United Church of Christ, a rainbow flag on the sign signals the church is "open and affirming" to people, regardless of sexual orientation.



The Rev. Chase Peeples, 41, leads the Country Club Congregational United Church of Christ in Kansas City, a church open to gay, lesbian and transgender congregants for two decades.

When his former church, in St. Joseph, Mo., made the same decision a few years ago, he says, controversy followed: 'We lost several members when we became open and affirming.'

*Catalin Abagiu for The Wall Street Journal*

About half the membership is gay or lesbian, the Rev. Chase Peebles said, and their attendance wasn't controversial even when the decision was made two decades ago to expressly welcome them.

"The older members of this church were folks active in civil rights movement, the women's movement," he said. "They just saw it as another justice issue."

The church sits in a neighborhood known as Brookside, where there is little sign of economic troubles along its string of boutique shops. Bella Napoli, an Italian market, does a brisk business in imported Italian coffee beans and pasta, sold by a young barista with a nose ring. Around the corner is a toy store stocking such upscale gifts as a kit to conduct solar experiments.

Kansas City has adapted better to the new economy than many cities. Once dependent on meatpacking and textiles, the region now has federal jobs, hospitals and companies such as Cerner Corp., a health-care information technology company.

A new fine arts center opened in 2011. In the redeveloped 18th and Vine area, jazz swings through neighborhood clubs. When the art-house Tivoli Cinemas needed to upgrade to digital projectors, it raised \$130,000 through an online Kickstarter campaign.

Kansas City has its own urban troubles. Public schools are notorious. A swath of the city core suffers high crime, unemployment and poverty.

In 2009, Rep. Cleaver came up with a decidedly Democratic idea to fight urban decay: concentrate federal stimulus money into the urban core with energy-efficient projects to simultaneously combat poverty and climate change. Nearly \$200 million was funneled into such projects as weatherizing homes and improving bus service.



The intersection of U.S. 54 and Main Street in El Dorado Springs, Mo. *Catalin Abagiu for The Wall Street Journal*



Kansas City police, meanwhile, initiated a system that sends an automated alert to officers if a gun goes off in certain high-crime neighborhoods. That sort of program wouldn't go over well in rural areas. In El Dorado Springs, the owner of the gun shop wouldn't give his name for fear that federal authorities might raid his store.

Like many big cities, Kansas City—which is 30% black and 10% Hispanic—faces racial tensions. The city has long been divided, east from west, along Troost Avenue, which was used as a geographic marker for segregation by schools and for redlining by banks.



Jami Carpenter, 32, who twice voted for President Barack Obama, says she doesn't argue politics in El Dorado Springs because so few people agree with her. 'You just keep your mouth shut a lot,' she says. She moved home to El Dorado seven years ago after living in Kansas City. She keeps a Kansas City area code on her cell phone. 'I'm not giving it up,' she says.

*Catalin Abagiu for The Wall Street Journal*

But resident Sarah L. Starnes, a white social worker, said she faced little hostility over two decades married to an African American and raising two biracial children. When the couple wed 21 years ago, Ms. Starnes didn't consider taking her husband's name, preferring to keep her own.

"I guess you could say I'm a feminist from way back," she said.

In El Dorado Springs, the same question looms for Jami Carpenter, a 32-year-old Democrat living in a Republican town. She expects to one day marry her boyfriend. When that happens, she would like to keep her last name.

The idea makes her nervous, Ms. Carpenter said: "That's not really how people do things around here."