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**Assessing the Rural-Urban Divide in a Red State**

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*This paper explores the rural-urban divide as it exists within Nebraska, which is a state that is largely homogenous, primarily red, with a historically sizable rural population that is in decline in most counties. Using survey data of attitudes towards social and economic issues, and self-identified political ideology, two key questions are addressed. As a result of rural depopulation has there been change in the urban-rural divide in Nebraska? Second, does the rural-urban divide persist when party identification, age, and income are controlled for in multivariate analyses? Bivariate results show that the rural-urban divide continues to be an important factor.* In the multivariate analyses rural and urban differences remain significant for prayer and sex education in public schools, gun control, assisting the poor when times are bad, and choosing to reduce services rather than raising taxes. *However, when it comes to ideology the rural-urban distinction is no longer significant. The discussion considers the current and potential future effects of the rural-urban divide in Nebraska.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Delineating states between red and blue has been popular over the last few decades. The media have utilized this sorting mechanism extensively and have reinforced it with electoral maps illustrating voting patterns by state. While it was originally largely founded upon electoral differences between states, over time it has been applied to cultural distinctions between liberal and conservative states.

The red-blue state delineation has been referenced by researchers exploring political behavior across the states. Gelman et. al. (2007, 365) point out that “states have real, significant cultural and political differences…..and that regional differences seem, if anything, to be getting more pronounced in the last decade or two.” However, they show that the media’s simplification of the red-blue delineation can be “somewhat misguided” (p.365). For example, they note that when it comes to the role of income in political preferences, income matters more in red states than in blue. They find rich people in poor states are more likely to support Republicans but in rich states income does not explain voter preference. Lax and Phillips (2012) show that the red-blue distinction can correlate with real policy effects in state houses. Typically liberal states have more liberal policies and conservative states have more conservative policies. However, when policy is incongruent with the majority of public opinion, states have a tendency towards moving beyond median voter preferences leading to policy that is more “polarized…relative to less polarized (ideologically mixed) opinion majorities (p. 164).”

In the third edition of *Culture Wars: The Myth of a Polarized America*, Fiorina continues to show that the masses are not as divided along the red-blue lines as so often touted in the media. Rather the differences that exist are at the elite level where polarization has become entrenched. Along a similar vein, Klinker (2004) argues that mostly Americans are still living in districts where electoral politics is competitive and in counties where there is considerable mixing of political parties.

Gimpel and Karnes (2006, 467) note that recent elections show that the red-blue maps really “mask a rural-urban divide *within* states.” Others describe the geographical delineation as metropolitan and non-metropolitan and find it helpful in understanding presidential election outcomes (Morrill, Knopp, and Brown, 2011). The rural-urban divide became a national discussion with the publication of Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas*, which provides a journalistic examination of why Kansans support public policy from the right, which seems counter to their economic interests. Frank asserts that rural Kansans place a greater emphasis on moral, rather than economic, issues and are willing to accept the economic consequences of supporting policies that are more advantageous to the wealthy instead of the working class.

While Frank’s work made quite a splash in the mainstream media, several researchers have suggested that it is flawed. Gimpel and Karnes (2006) argue that Frank’s “unflattering” thesis is misguided as morality issues are not the sole or most dominant motivation for rural support of conservative policies. They point out that the economic situation in rural America is not as dire as Frank and others seem to think. In fact, they cite life and job satisfaction studies that show that rural people are more satisfied than urban and suburban residents. They also see a strong entrepreneurial spirit in rural areas that places a premium on self-reliance and limited government intervention. Finally, they argue that rural America has actually responded quite well to economic challenges such as globalism and that out-migration actually reduces unemployment in rural areas. They conclude that Democratic policy is not only off the mark on morality issues but “also because many rural Americans doubt whether typical Democratic *economic* positions fit with what they believe is true about themselves and the world (471).”

In addressing Frank’s assertion Bartels (2006) uses survey and election data to show the reasons why white voters without college degrees have left the Democratic Party. He argues that Frank essentially sees the problem with Kansas as being one related to education, that is, less educated Kansans are more likely to support conservative moral policy in spite of the economic consequences. While agreeing that white voters without college degrees have moved from the Democrats, he argues that Frank misunderstands the contours of this change. First, most of the movement has been in the South, and largely reflects a party realignment due to evolving racial politics. Second, while there has been an increase in the saliency of social issues, the intensity for these issues has largely come from Americans with more education. More importantly, he argues that economic concerns are more salient than social issues. Further, while white working class voters are more supportive of Republican economics, they actually are more closely aligned with Democrats on social issues (Bartels 2006).

Walsh (2012) uses an ethnographic approach to examine why people vote against their interests. She asserts that Wisconsin is an interesting case study because while there is a long rural-urban divide in the state, party identification is unsettled as some rural areas are more likely to identify with the Democrats. Through her participation in conversations with 37 voluntary groups across Wisconsin over four years she finds a rural consciousness predicated on the perception of rural people that the urban elite are disrespectful of rural citizens and rural life. The animus rural residents might have towards government intervention is less about an ideological predisposition for laissez-faire policy but more a reflection of “the ways people intertwine their perceptions of political elite-induced deprivation with their class and place-based identities (530).” For instance, the reason they vote against their economic interests is that increased taxation is a government action that is “by definition an injustice to themselves and taxation only results in rewarding the antithesis of good Americans’ work ethic (2006, 529).”

More research is necessary to assess if there is rural identity across the nation or if it varies from region to region, blue state to red state and within states. Further, while the rural-urban dimension is helpful in assessing electoral outcomes, when anomalies (i.e., counties that run counter to conventional wisdom in the red-blue dimension) are considered there is evidence that this pattern is not inherently static (Morrill, Knopp, and Brown 2011). That is, there can be change and understanding what might lead to change is instructive.

In this study, we examine Nebraska’s rural identity by comparing it to the major urban populations in the state. If the assertion of the red state-blue state dynamic actually masks a rural-urban divide, it should exist even with a red state. Nebraska provides an interesting state to assess this as it is a state that is largely homogenous, primarily red, with a historically sizable rural population that is in decline in most counties.

**GO BIG RED!**

Most political observers know Nebraska as a red state. As well they should. Until the election of 2008, Nebraska had not offered an electoral vote for a Democratic candidate since 1964. From statehood in 1867 to 2011, Nebraska has had 36 U.S. senators, 75% of them have been Republican. During the same period Nebraska has had 100 U.S. representatives and 66% were Republican.[[1]](#footnote-1) Currently, all five federal elected offices are held by Republicans. All of the state’s elected executive offices are held by Republicans and while the unicameral legislature is non-partisan it typically contains a majority of Republicans. Even the Democrats are often conservative. Past Democratic governors, such as J.J. Exon, Bob Kerry and Ben Nelson, were known for being fiscally conservative and pro-business. However, Democrats have had somewhat more success in some key local elections in urban. As of 2012, the two largest cities in Nebraska, Lincoln and Omaha, had Democratic mayors.

How Nebraskans identify by political party has changed somewhat over the last few decades. In 1980, Democrats made up 44% of registered voters, but that has declined nearly 11 points to just a third of registered voters in 2010. The Republicans have not appeared to have captured Democrats leaving the party, but rather those identifying as non-political has increased nearly threefold from 1980 to 2010. The percentage of voters registering as Republicans has changed little over the years, hovering around 50%.

**Table 1: Percentage of Registered Voters by Political Party**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Year** | **Republicans** | **Democrats** | **Non-Political** |
| 1980 | 49.3 | 44 | 6.3 |
| 1990 | 50.4 | 42 | 7.5 |
| 2000 | 49.5 | 36.4 | 13.8 |
| 2010 | 48.1 | 33.3 | 18.6 |

*Note: Percentages tabulated from data provided by the Nebraska Secretary of State.*

While there have been important changes in political party status in Nebraska, there has been little change in how Nebraskans identify their political ideology. According to annual surveys conducted by the University of Nebraska’s Bureau of Sociological Research, in 1985 40.7% of Nebraskans identified as conservative, 44.1% were middle of the road and 15.2% were liberal. In 2010, those percentages had changed only slightly to 44.9% conservative, 41.7% middle of the road and 13.4% liberal.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The perception of Nebraska as rural is largely rooted in historical references. In the early years of the state immigrants came to Nebraska to farm and later to ranch. Small towns grew up along the railroad lines to support agriculture. However, in the last 30-40 years Nebraskans have left many of the farms and small towns that dotted the prairie for metropolitan areas, in the east or urban areas clustered along Nebraska’s lone interstate. In 1980 about 51% of Nebraskans lived in rural areas, but by 2010 that number had dropped 10 percentage points (USDA, 2011).[[3]](#footnote-3) Nebraska’s population is increasingly located in three counties in the southeastern part of the states (which include the cities of Omaha and Lincoln) that account for over half of the state’s population (Nebraska Blue Book, p.44). While nearly 70% of Nebraska counties lost population from 2000 to 2010, the two largest metropolitan areas and their suburbs experienced the fastest growth in the state with Omaha and Lincoln growing at double-digit rates (Cauchon 2011).

The question is whether or not the changing nature of the rural-urban demographics in Nebraska will change the political culture of the state. Unfortunately there has been little research in recent history on the political culture of Nebraska so we are left to assume that red means conservative politics and policy in the state and that there is little difference across geographical or socio-economic characteristics. Consequently, it is assumed by many that Nebraska has little to add to our understanding of the red-blue typology because its dynamics are typical of any red state. That assumption is infrequently tested.

While there is not much recent literature on the political landscape of Nebraska, Duffin (2011) examines how changes in population patterns, movement from rural to urban, affect elections to the U.S. Senate in the state. She finds that while Republicans hold a statewide advantage over Democrats, counties that are increasing in population show more support for Democratic candidates and counties with declining populations are more supportive of Republican candidates. She expects that in spite of Nebraska being tagged a red state changing population dynamics will likely insure a competitive two party system in Nebraska moving forward.

Duffin (2011) describes demographic changes in Nebraska as they inform us about the changing party affiliation between counties increasing and decreasing in population. However, this paper focuses on political attitudes of Nebraskans over time, place, party, and demographics (age and income). Specifically two research questions are considered. First, has there been change in the urban-rural divide in Nebraska? Second, does the rural-urban divide persist when party identification, age and income are taken under consideration?

**DATA AND METHODS**

The data come from survey research conducted by the Bureau of Sociological Research (BOSR) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. BOSR has been conducting an annual survey of Nebraska, the Annual Social Indicators Survey, since 1977.[[4]](#footnote-4) Until the last few years the survey was administered over the telephone and now it is through the mail. In this study, unweighted data are used from the 1982 survey and the 2012 survey. In order to compare changing political attitudes over time, 2012 questions replicate 1982 questions. In 2012 the sample was purchased by the BSOR from Survey Sampling International, with 3319 cases deemed eligible and deliverable and 954 respondents, the overall response rate was 28.7%. The representativeness of the sample was acceptable in terms of the region of the state and sex but the survey results over represent people over the age of 65 and under represent people from 19-44. Based on 2010 Census estimates, 46.4% of Nebraskans are aged 19-44 and 18.4% are aged 65 and over, but in the survey the percentages are 21.3% for 19-44 and 34.5% for 65 and over. Women were slightly more represented in the sample than in Census estimates (54.2% in the sample and 50.4% in the Census) and people in the Omaha area were slightly under represented in the sample, 38.8% in the sample to 41.5% in the survey (Bureau of Sociological Research 2012).

The main independent variable of interest is rural-urban. In this study, rural and urban is measured somewhat differently than typical. Respondents are categorized into two groups. The urban grouping consists of only three of the state’s 93 counties. As noted above, these urban counties are by far the most populated counties in the state and are home to the two major urban areas, Omaha and Lincoln. All other respondents are placed into the rural grouping. This categorization is justified for a few reasons. First, the urban grouping includes Omaha and Lincoln, which are the commerce and political capitols of the state. This is important because Walsh (2012) reports that rural consciousness is rooted in the rural perception of elite urban status. Thus, this delineation of urban and rural allows for distinguishing between those people who live outside of the area of elite status with those who live inside the area of elite status. Second, as noted, most counties are experiencing out-migration but these urban counties saw double digit increases; thus the counties are clearly emerging as relatively mega population centers in the state. There are other areas with strong metropolitan populations that are growing but they are not part of the commerce and political elite.

The dependent variables are measures of political attitudes on social, political and economic issues. In 1982 the BOSR survey included several questions regarding attitudes of timely issues (abortion, sex education, prayer in public schools, gun control, support for the military, assistance to the poor and taxes). In order to assess if there had been change over time in terms of attitudes on these issues, several relevant questions were replicated in 2012, with only a few minor modifications. A four-point Likert response set is used to measure attitudes. The 1982 question had a “neutral don’t know” response and the 2012 question had a “don’t know” response. In both years those response categories are excluded from the analysis. Another dependent measure is political ideology, where respondents were asked to identify where they are on the political liberal-conservative spectrum.

After an examination of the distributions on the political attitudes for the state as a whole in 2012, crosstab and chi-square testing are used to examine the differences between urban and rural on the measures of political attitudes and ideology comparing results from 1982 and 2012. Next using the 2012 data, logistic regression is used to assess how rural-urban currently affects political attitudes where the response set has been dichotomized such that those who strongly agree and agree are collapsed together and those who disagree and strongly disagree are collapsed likewise. Age, income and party identification are used as control variables in the logistic regressions.

**RESULTS**

Table 2 shows results from the 2012 questions for the overall sample. As can be seen, there is a significant amount of support for sex education in public schools, almost 54% disagreed/strongly disagreed in “strict” gun control and less than 47% reported support for prayer in public schools. Over 77% agree/strongly agree that abortion is a private decision that should not be regulated by government, which is certainly a counterintuitive finding as Nebraska is typically considered a pro-life state, in fact, one of the stronger pro-life states. However, this counterintuitive result is possibly a result of the question wording. It is likely that this is not a valid measure of abortion attitudes as the statement might be seen as leading, confusing and/or double-barreled. Or it might be that while Nebraskans are against abortion, they are more against government regulation. The question might be best considered a measure of support for government regulation. While Nebraskans are patriotic and supportive of the military, about 50% support increasing spending on the military. Just over 54% supported cutting services rather than raising taxes and less than two in ten believe that the poor should take care of themselves during tough times.

**Table 2: Nebraska Attitudes on Selected Political Issues 2012**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **SA** | **A** | **D** | **SD** |
| Whether to have an abortion is a strictly private decision which should not be regulated by government one way or another. | 50.1 | 27.6 | 9.7 | 12.6 |
| The United States should increase spending for military defense. | 14.6 | 36.1 | 38.6 | 10.7 |
| The country would be better off if we had strict gun control laws. | 17.8 | 28.2 | 23.4 | 30.5 |
| The public schools should conduct prayers as part of their official business. | 18.1 | 28.6 | 32.4 | 21.0 |
| Sex education classes taught by qualified teachers should be offered to students in all public schools. | 33.6 | 51.3 | 10.1 | 4.9 |
| During bad times the poor should take care of themselves. | 3.2 | 16.1 | 53.2 | 27.5 |
| Government should reduce services rather than raise taxes. | 20.1 | 34.0 | 31.8 | 14.1 |

The next set of tables (3a-3h) examine the same questions at two different time periods (1982 and 2012) and between regions (urban and rural), which addresses the first research question of whether or not there has been a change in the rural-urban dynamic over time. Crosstabs and chi-squares were produced for the 1982 and 2012 rural-urban differences, respectively. So, for example, the 1982 chi-square signifies a statistically significant difference between rural and urban attitudes in that year.

**Table 3a: Abortion Should Not Be Regulated By Government**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **SA** | **A** | **D** | **SD** |
| **Urban** | | | | |
| 1982 (n=721 ) | 29.8 | 47.6 | 15.5 | 7.1 |
| 2012 (n=364) | 50.5 | 29.1 | 10.7 | 9.6 |
| **Rural** | | | | |
| 1982 (n=1074) | 18.9 | 54.1 | 19.2 | 7.8 |
| 2012 (n=382) | 49.7 | 26.2 | 8.6 | 15.4 |

1982 Chi-square = 29.210(.000)

2012 Chi-square = 6.468(.091)

Table 3a shows that the counterintuitive results on abortion can be found in rural and urban areas but urban areas are more likely to strongly agree/agree. In both years a large percentage of urban and rural Nebraskans agreed or strongly agreed that abortion is a private matter that should not be regulated by government. It is noteworthy that the percentage of Nebraskans agreeing/strongly agreeing was about the same in both years. The chi-square testing shows significant differences between urban and rural in 1982 but not in 2012.

Table 3b shows statistically significant differences between urban and rural in both years but not large differences. In both urban and rural areas there was more support (agree and strongly agree) for military spending in 1982 than in 2012. Table 3c shows that gun control perceptions have changed over time. In urban areas in both 1982 and 2012 about 60% agree or strongly agree that gun control is good for the country. However, urban people were nearly twice as likely to strongly disagree with gun control in 2012 as they were in 1982, but strong disagreement was still less than 20 percent. Those who agreed or strongly agreed with gun control in rural areas dropped about nine points from 1982 to 2012. The most dramatic change was in the percentage that strongly disagree in rural areas, increasing nearly two and a half times from 1982 (16.9%) to 2012 (42.2%). Strong disagreement in rural areas is over 23 points higher in rural than urban areas. Clearly gun control has become a very salient issue, particularly in rural areas.

**Table 3b: The US Should Increase Military Defense Spending**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **SA** | **A** | **D** | **SD** |
| **Urban** | | | | |
| 1982 (n=720 ) | 15.1 | 47.5 | 29.0 | 8.3 |
| 2012 (n=334) | 12.9 | 31.7 | 42.5 | 12.9 |
| **Rural** | | | | |
| 1982 (n=1058) | 14.4 | 53.7 | 27.8 | 4.2 |
| 2012 (n=339) | 16.2 | 40.4 | 34.8 | 8.6 |

1982 Chi-square = 16.375(.001)

2012 Chi-square = 10.325(.016)

**Table 3c: The Country Would Be Better Off With Strict Gun Control**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **SA** | **A** | **D** | **SD** |
| **Urban** | | | | |
| 1982 (n=720 ) | 19.3 | 41.4 | 30.6 | 8.8 |
| 2012 (n=350) | 23.7 | 36.0 | 21.7 | 18.6 |
| **Rural** | | | | |
| 1982 (n=1072) | 8.0 | 33.5 | 41.6 | 16.9 |
| 2012 (n= 358) | 12.0 | 20.7 | 25.1 | 42.2 |

1982 Chi-square = 86.083 (.000)

2012 Chi-square = 61.557(.000)

Rural areas have become much more likely to support prayer in public schools (Table 3d). In 1982 only 6% strongly support prayer in public schools but that grew to nearly a quarter of rural residents supporting it in 2012. Again, there are statistically significant differences between urban and rural in both years. There is not much change in support for sex education in public schools (Table 3e), it remains strong in both urban and rural areas, but urban areas are significantly more likely to support sex education in public schools.

**Table 3d: Public Schools Should Conduct Prayers**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **SA** | **A** | **D** | **SD** |
| **Urban** | | | | |
| 1982 (n=710 ) | 5.9 | 29.9 | 50.4 | 13.8 |
| 2012 (n=346) | 11.3 | 27.5 | 35.3 | 26.0 |
| **Rural** | | | | |
| 1982 (n=1081) | 6.1 | 37.6 | 49.9 | 6.5 |
| 2012 (n=349) | 24.9 | 29.8 | 29.5 | 15.9 |

1982 Chi-square = 31.942(.000)

2012 Chi-square = 28.229(.000)

**Table 3e: Sex Education Should Be Offered in Public Schools**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **SA** | **A** | **D** | **SD** |
| **Urban** | | | | |
| 1982 (n= 729) | 28.4 | 54.5 | 12.6 | 4.5 |
| 2012 (n=373) | 40.2 | 49.3 | 7.5 | 2.9 |
| **Rural** | | | | |
| 1982 (n=1087) | 16.5 | 55.9 | 20.9 | 6.7 |
| 2012 (n=379) | 27.1 | 53.2 | 12.8 | 6.9 |

1982 Chi-square = 49.222(.000)

2012 Chi-square = 21.142(.000)

The next two tables look at economic issues. The comparison between 1982 and 2012 is somewhat complicated by a slightly different response set for the questions (refer to notes under each table). Regarding the poor taking care of themselves in bad times (Table 3f), both urban and rural areas largely disagree that the poor should be on their own. There are statistically significant differences between rural and urban in 1982 but not in 2012. Rural residents were slightly more likely to disagree that the poor should take care of themselves during bad times in 2012 than in 1982 and there is even a slighter increase in disagreement in urban areas. In terms of reducing services instead of raising taxes (3g) both urban and rural areas dropped about 15 percentage points in their agreement, meaning that they were less likely to support reducing services over raising taxes in 2012 than there were in 1982.

**Table 3f: During Bad Times the Poor Should Take Care of Themselves**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **SA** | **A** | **D** | **SD** |
| **Urban** | | | | |
| 1982 (n=358 ) |  | 19.6 | 80.4 |  |
| 2012 (n=352) | 2.8 | 13.1 | 54.5 | 29.5 |
| **Rural** | | | | |
| 1982 (n=549) |  | 28.8 | 71.2 |  |
| 2012 (n=358) | 3.6 | 19.0 | 52.0 | 25.4 |

Note: In 1982 the response was only agree or disagree.

1982 Chi-square = 9.802(.002)

2012 Chi-Square = 5.549(.136)

**Table 3g: Reduce Services Instead of Raising Taxes**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **SA** | **A** | **D** | **SD** |
| **Urban** | | | | |
| 1982 (n= 615) | 34.3 | 28.9 | 21.1 | 15.6 |
| 2012 (n=339) | 17.4 | 30.4 | 36.9 | 15.3 |
| **Rural** | | | | |
| 1982 (n=936) | 40.5 | 35.4 | 17.0 | 7.2 |
| 2012 (n=343) | 22.7 | 37.6 | 26.8 | 12.8 |

1982 Chi-square = 37.049(.000)

2012 Chi-square = 11.211(.011)

*Note: The 1982 question asked if the respondent preferred raising taxes or reducing services with a response set of raise taxes (strongly), raise taxes (not strongly), reduce services (not strongly), reduce services (strongly). For comparisons the 1982 response set is put into the Likert formula following the corresponding order of the 1982 response set. That is, raising taxes (strongly agree) is considered reducing services (strongly disagree).*

Table 3h looks at changes in political ideology over time. Compared to 1982, urban areas are significantly less likely to report being conservative, moving into the moderate category. To a smaller degree, rural residents are less likely to report being conservative in 2012 versus 1982. The percentage that identify liberal, while small overall, increased one point.

**Table 3h: Political Ideology**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Liberal** | **Moderate** | **Conservative** |
| **Urban** |  |  |  |
| 1982 (n=506 ) | 21.7 | 26.3 | 52.0 |
| 2012 (n=335) | 25.1 | 37.6 | 37.3 |
| **Rural** |  |  |  |
| 1982 (n=743) | 14.3 | 29.5 | 56.3 |
| 2012 (n=334) | 15.0 | 35.9 | 49.1 |

1982 Chi-square = 11.819(.003)

2012 Chi-square = 14.035(.001)

Addressing the second research question, Table 4 provides the results of seven logistic regressions where the dependent variables are the political attitude questions from the bivariate analyses but have been dichotomized into those who agree or strongly agree (coded 0) and those who disagree or strongly disagree (coded 1). The rural-urban variable is coded 1 (rural) and 0 (urban). Party identification is made into two dummy variables (Democrat; Independent) with Republican as the reference group. Age consists of three dummy variables (less than 35 years old; 35-49 years old; over 65 years old) with ages 50-64 as the reference group. Income has four dummy predictors (less than $25,000; $25,000-39,999; $40,000-59,999; $60,000-74,999) with income $75,000 and over as the reference group).

With the dependent variables having the disagree response taking the value 1 in the data, a positive sign on an independent variable coefficient in the logistic regression means the variable’s influence on the respondents is to have the respondent more likely to disagree and a negative sign on a coefficient means the respondent is less likely to disagree. Moreover, the exponential transformation of a coefficient gives the odds ratio of disagreeing to agreeing. A ratio greater than 1 means the odds of disagreeing grows and a ratio less than 1 means the odds of disagreeing is reduced. (When the exponential transformation is less than 1, the inverse of the transformation gives the odds of agreeing.)

After controlling for party identification, age, and income, the difference between rural and urban remains significant for prayer and sex education in public schools, gun control, assisting the poor when times are bad, and choosing to reduce services rather than to raise taxes. From the regression coefficients, odds ratios can be calculated in the context of each variable. In terms of prayer, being a rural resident reduces the odds of disagreeing that prayer should be allowed in public school by nearly 1.5 times, which is calculated by taking 1/.672 **(**Exp β), while being rural increases the odds of disagreeing that sex education should be in public schools by 1.7 times. The most striking difference between rural and urban odds of reporting different opinions regards gun control. As can be seen from Table 4, rural residents are almost three times more likely to disagree that strict gun control would be good for the country. The odds of disagreeing that the poor should be assisted when times are bad decreases 1.53 times for rural respondents and decreases 1.55 times when considering government should reduce services rather than raise taxes.

The results from the control variables are interesting as well. Most striking in terms of age is that people under 35 are the most different from the other age categories, primarily when it comes to abortion and prayer in public schools. Those in the under 35 age group are about two times more likely to disagree compared to the reference group.

The second most interesting finding for the controls is that income does not play a very important role in explaining differences in attitudes. However, it is worth noting that compared to the highest income group, the lowest income group are a little over twice as less likely to disagree that prayer should be allowed in public schools. With defense spending, they are about twice as less likely to disagree as the reference group.

When it comes to political party there are no real surprises. On every measure there are significant differences between party identification and in the expected direction. Perhaps most interesting is that Independents are more liberal than Republicans on nearly every issue, suggesting that Independents in Nebraska are a distinct group and not just necessarily Republicans without an identification but rather a group that sees differently than Republicans.

**Table 4: Logistic Regressions of Political Attitudes (Strongly Disagree/Disagree = 1)**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **β** | **S.E.** | **Sig** | **Exp**  **(β)** |  | **Β** | **S.E.** | **Sig** | **Exp**  **(β)** |
| **Abortion**  Rural  Democrat  Independent  Age < 35  Age 35-49  Age 65>  Income <$25,000  $25,000-39,999  $40,000-59,999  $60,000-74,999 | .221  -1.101  -.524  .668  .327  -.365  -.268  -.342  .184  .017 | .190  .237  .221  .289  .247  .238  .291  .329  .247  .285 | .244  .000c  .018a  .021a  .185  .125  .357  .298  .457  .954 | 1.248  .332  .592  1.950  1.387  .694  .765  .710  1.202  1.017 | **Prayer**  Rural  Democrat  Independent  Age < 35  Age 35-49  Age 65>  Income <$25,000  $25,000-39,999  $40,000-59,999  $60,000-74,999 | -.397  1.215  .849  .793  .411  .026  -.816  -.529  -.288  -.164 | .166  .198  .202  .286  .231  .201  .250  .282  .225  .264 | .017a  .000c  .000c  .006b  .075  .896  .001c  .061  .201  .534 | .672  3.369  2.338  2.209  1.508  1.027  .442  .589  .750  .849 |
| **Sex Education**  Rural  Democrat  Independent  Age < 35  Age 35-49  Age 65>  Income <$25,000  $25,000-39,999  $40,000-59,999  $60,000-74,999 | .535  -1.634  -.859  -.871  -.110  .359  -.274  -.290  .035  -1.047 | .227  .320  .266  .505  .316  .255  .330  .363  .284  .437 | .018a  .000c  .001c  .084  .729  .159  .406  .424  .902  .017a | 1.708  .195  .424  .418  .896  1.432  .761  .748  1.036  .351 | **Gun Control**  Rural  Democrat  Independent  Age < 35  Age 35-49  Age 65>  Income <$25,000  $25,000-39,999  $40,000-59,999  $60,000-74,999 | 1.097  -1.645  -1.080  .655  .186  .138  -.206  .014  .624  -.018 | .173  .206  .207  .288  .238  .209  .256  .275  .242  .270 | .000c  .000c  .000c  .023b  .433  .509  .421  .960  .010b  .947 | 2.996  .193  .340  1.925  1.205  1.148  .814  1.014  1.866  .982 |
| **Defense Spend**  Rural  Democrat  Independent  Age < 35  Age 35-49  Age 65>  Income <$25,000  $25,000-39,999  $40,000-59,999  $60,000-74,999 | .165  -1.239  -.535  .511  .224  -.397  -.682  -.228  .133  .022 | .207  .267  .239  .330  .267  .257  .343  .349  .266  .304 | .424  .000c  .025a  .121  .401  .122  .047a  .514  .617  .943 | 1.180  .290  .586  1.667  1.251  .672  .506  .796  1.142  1.022 | **Poor**  Rural  Democrat  Independent  Age < 35  Age 35-49  Age 65>  Income <$25,000  $25,000-39,999  $40,000-59,999  $60,000-74,999 | -.426  .963  .333  -.013  -.269  .080  .375  .080  .106  .251 | .203  .253  .232  .343  .268  .245  .309  .332  .265  .321 | .036a  .000c  .151  .970  .315  .745  .225  .810  .690  .433 | .653  2.619  1.395  .987  .764  1.083  1.455  1.083  1.112  1.286 |
| **Reduce Services**  Rural  Democrat  Independent  Age < 35  Age 35-49  Age 65>  Income <$25,000  $25,000-39,999  $40,000-59,999  $60,000-74,999 | -.438  2.085  1.136  .038  .388  .449  .339  .911  .069  .132 | .177  .212  .212  .296  .247  .213  .256  .295  .240  .285 | .013a  .000c  .000c  .898  .116  .035a  .185  .002b  .774  .643 | .645  8.044  3.114  1.039  1.475  1.567  1.404  2.486  1.071  1.141 |  |  |  |  |  |

a means significant at .05 level, b at the .01 levels and c at the .001 level.

The final regression is OLS with the dependent variable being a five point scale of liberalism/conservatism ranging from 1(1 = very liberal to 5 = very conservative). As can be seen in Table 5, there is not a significant difference between urban and rural when controlling for party, age and income. As expected, Democrats are significantly more likely to be liberal than Republicans and younger people are somewhat more likely to be liberal. Income levels play no role in predicting political ideology.

**Table 5: Multiple Regression Predicting Political Ideology**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **B** | **S.E.** | **t (p.value)** | **beta** |
| Rural | .088 | .064 | 1.378(.169) | .044 |
| Democrat | -1.393 | .074 | -18.944(.000c) | -.645 |
| Independent | -.798 | .078 | -10.213(.000c) | -.346 |
| Age |  |  |  |  |
| Less than 34 years old | -.271 | .105 | -2.586(.010b) | -.086 |
| 35-49 years old | -.143 | .089 | -1.611(.108) | -.055 |
| 65 and over years old | .014 | .076 | .180(.857 | .006 |
| Income |  |  |  |  |
| <$25,000 | .015 | .095 | .156(.876) | .006 |
| $25,000-39,999 | -.034 | .104 | -.324(.746) | -.011 |
| $40,000-59,999 | .068 | .085 | .802(.423) | .028 |
| $60,000-74,999 | .151 | .101 | 1.502(.134) | .051 |

a means significant at .05 level, b at the .01 levels and c at the .001 level.

**DISCUSSION**

This paper explores two questions. As a result of rural depopulation has there been change in the urban-rural divide in Nebraska? Second, does the rural-urban divide persist when party identification, age, and income are controlled for in multivariate analyses? Regarding the first question, crosstabular and chi-square significance testing shows that rural and urban were significantly different on all measures in 1982; in 2012 they were still significantly different on most issues except abortion and whether or not the poor should take care of themselves during bad times. Rural and urban differences are particularly strong in terms of gun control, with rural residents showing a much stronger rejection of gun control in 2012 than in 1982. Rural areas have become much more likely to support prayer in public schools.

Results from the multivariate analyses for the 2012 data show that the rural-urban difference is important even when controlling for party identification, age and income. The difference between rural and urban remains significant for prayer and sex education in public schools, gun control, assisting the poor when times are bad, and choosing to reduce services rather than raising taxes. Again, gun control is a major issue in separating rural and urban with rural respondents three times more likely to disagree with gun control. However, when it comes to ideology the rural-urban distinction is no longer significant when controls are employed in the analysis.

As noted the control variables provide some interesting insight. For instance, income is not a very important predictor of attitudes, with a few exceptions; the lowest income bracket is more likely to support prayer in public school and increasing defense spending. These findings are potentially counter to what Gelman et. al. (2007) assert in that income matters more in red areas than blue. Also, age is not that important except that Nebraskans under 35 report more liberal stances on abortion and prayer in public schools. They are also less likely to be conservative.

Overall, this paper reveals that in terms of some key measures of political attitudes, the rural-urban divide matters in Nebraska even though it is a largely homogenous, red state with a strong rural background. On some measures the differences are not large but in the case of gun control, and to a less extent prayer in public schools, the differences have grown, in other areas, such as abortion and whether or not the poor should take care of themselves the differences have gone away. It is hard to estimate what differences these changes will have if the urban areas in Nebraska continue to grow while many rural counties continue a decline. However, it might be expected that attitudinal differences will likely either remain or expand slightly. In terms of gun control it is likely that the difference will stay strong as gun issues have become a very important issue for rural areas. Urban areas, particularly Omaha, might be more inclined to support gun control because of high rate of murders of African Americans. In fact, in 2011 Nebraska had a black homicide rate twice the national average, with 27 murders taking place in Omaha (Burbach 2014). Or it could be that the differences captures a part of the rural consciousness described by Walsh (2012) in that rural people see gun control as just another intervention by urban elites into their daily affairs. The other differences between rural and urban remaining when controlling for party identification, age and income might also be tapping into a rural identity that needs to be explored more deeply with qualitative analysis.

Do the findings here help suggest how electoral politics might be changing in Nebraska? Duffin (2010) shows rural and urban differences in voting and the results here show differences on attitudes towards key issues that likely affect electoral politics. If Nebraska continues to become more urban, than it is likely that Nebraska will be increasingly a competitive two party system as Duffin speculates. However, the current landscape for Democrats is challenging as seen in a 2012 U.S. Senate election where nationally-known and former U.S. Senator Bob Kerrey was handily defeated by his Republican opponent Deb Fisher. Kerrey had been out of the state for several years living in New York as the president of the New School. While Kerrey had been both a popular governor and later senator and an honored veteran of the Vietnam War, he did very poorly in rural Nebraska. Kerrey did well in the urban parts of the state, winning the two largest metropolitan counties (Lancaster and Douglas) but Fischer handily beat him in the rural areas (Tysver and Goodsell 2012). One of the monikers used against Kerrey was “New York Bob” a reference to the fact that he left the state to live in an urban, elitist area, once again illustrating the findings of Walsh (2012). The differences between rural and urban matter can be seen in this election, which shows that if Democrats are going to be competitive, they will have to be able to sell their message in rural areas as well urban.

While this paper provides some interesting results for how the rural-urban divide plays out in a red state, there are problems. First, there are only seven measures of attitudes used in the study and one, the abortion question, has problems with validity. Second, the response rate for the survey was not high and the sample included an overrepresentation of older Nebraskans and an under representation of younger Nebraskans, which is typical in a mail survey, but concerning when making inferences to the population. Third, the results from one state allow for a richer understanding of that state but comparisons to other states would improve the clarity of the findings. It would be useful in futures studies to compare Nebraska with another red state and also a blue state.

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1. Calculated from information contained in *The Nebraska Bluebook.* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Data come from the University of Nebraska, Bureau of Sociological Research, but the analysis of the data was conducted by the authors of this paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Calculated by authors from data provided online by the USDA. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The authors would like to thank the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for access to survey data, but the authors are responsible for analysis and interpretation of the data and any errors or ommissions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)