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**People and Places Left Behind:
Work, Culture and Politics in the Rural United States**

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People and Places Left Behind: Work, Culture and Politics in the Rural United States¹

Jessica D. Ulrich-Schad and Cynthia M. Duncan

Introduction: Three Rural Americas

White rural residents in the U.S. voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump and his promise to restore an economic era in which working-class U.S. citizens did well, and that vote brought new attention to conditions in rural places. Political leaders, journalists and the U.S. public are asking questions about the reasons for this decisive rural vote. Rural residents of the U.S., traditionally committed to small government (Stock and Johnston 2001; Cramer 2016), have long backed Republican candidates overall, but the extent of Republican support in 2016 was different. While the majority of votes for Trump came from suburban areas (Balz 2017), rural areas did vote overwhelmingly for the Republican candidate. Trump received 62 percent of the rural vote, more than any other Republican candidate in modern times (Wilson 2017). There is debate about the extent to which this strong support emerged from economic troubles versus the extent to which it is rooted in a rural cultural identity that is seeding a new rural populism.

On the one hand, rural areas in general have been experiencing economic restructuring and decline for decades, and over that time the federal and state governments have done little to support blue-collar workers who need to make a transition to new work. Indeed, as Packer (2013) reminds us, the government pulled back on public investments in human capital just as restructuring began to change work in rural and urban rustbelt communities. Additionally, Cramer (2016) points out that some rural people harbor resentment towards urban people and places that they perceive to be getting more than their fair share in government spending.

On the other hand, some scholars and journalists argue there is growing rural-urban divide that includes not just economic differences but also “cultural” differences, different values and attitudes about what matters and where the U.S. is headed and should go. As we will show, rural people in the U.S. feel important ties to place, and deeply value family and community. These qualities are among the most important reasons people stay in rural places even when jobs are disappearing. Many patch together livelihoods, sometimes relying on several jobs or informal work, or on disability payments and food stamps, and, often, help from family, so they can stay. In our interviews, many talk about their nostalgia for the lost economy, their “heritage,” as they put it, and see the loss of decent jobs as a cultural loss that has undermined their community and way of life.

While certain characteristics and changes impact all rural places in the U.S., our research shows there are important differences depending on local and regional economic and demographic trends, as well as the historical political economy – trends that are often tied to the character and use of the natural resources in the place. Using our own and secondary data, in this paper we argue that there are three rural Americas, and that their social and economic conditions, both now and historically, help us understand the political trends that are emerging. We describe (1) areas rich in natural amenities, (2) areas undergoing profound economic and demographic transitions, and (3) chronically poor areas. Looking at the rural U.S. from this perspective helps provide a more nuanced framework for understanding the role of rural residents in current national politics, and especially in the last election.

¹ For a full version of this paper, the methods used, and the reference list, please see: Ulrich-Schad, Jessica D. and Cynthia M. Duncan. 2018. “People and Places Left Behind: Work, Culture and Politics in the Rural United States.” Special Issue on Emancipatory Rural Politics in the *Journal of Peasant Studies* 45(1): 59-79.

Methods

We draw upon diverse, empirical data collected through surveys, interviews, and focus groups as well as secondary data, to consider work, culture and politics in different rural U.S. settings during a period of profound economic change. From 2007 to 2011, we surveyed nearly 17,000 rural residents of rural places in the U.S. as part of the Community and Environment in Rural America (CERA) project started by the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire to better understand how rural U.S. residents think about their communities, local economies, environmental issues, and the future. An economically, geographically, and demographically diverse set of 38 counties in 12 states was chosen to represent some of the key differences across the rural U.S.² While respondents to our surveys are not representative of all people living in the rural U.S., the places they reside are illustrative of rural economies. We use this data to compare and contrast ideal types of rural places we consider Amenity Rich (13 counties, 6 states, N=4,893), Transitioning (16 counties, 7 states, N=7,028), and Chronically Poor (10 counties, 4 states, N=4,896) (described in more detail below). We also use data from a nationally representative CERA survey (N=2,005) that asked comparable questions to both rural and urban respondents.

To more deeply understand what it is like to live and work in a variety of rural places, we conducted in-depth interviews in four of the places we surveyed, including with residents and community leaders in one Transitioning community (N=35) and two Chronically Poor places (N=85) to update Worlds Apart: Poverty and Politics in Rural America in 2013 (Duncan 2015). The first author also conducted 59 interviews with residents and leaders in one Amenity Rich community in 2013. While Chronically Poor Areas such as Native American reservations and the Colonias and areas in the Southwest where many Hispanic U.S. residents live are important to the story, we do not have data from these areas.

Introduction of the Three Rural Americas

The three types of rural U.S. places we present here are ideal types. Secondary data (see Table 1) and data we collected show how they capture key trends in the rural U.S. today. We show how economic conditions, demographic trends, and civic culture converge but also clearly vary across these three rural Americas. Amenity Rich Areas have been growing in population as their mountains, lakes or seashore, or other natural amenities make them places that are attractive to retirees, recreationists, and “laptop professionals.” There are many newcomers in these rural places, and they are often college-educated professionals who have come for the natural beauty and outdoor activities – for the quality of life these places offer. These Amenity Rich Areas do not share the overall pattern of economic decline and out-migration that have become the dominant trend in most rural places in the U.S., but many have seen good blue-collar jobs disappear, and now, as an expanded recreation economy takes hold, they face challenges regarding affordability, year-round, well-paying jobs, as well as tensions between new and long-time residents about community identity and development going forward. Overall, these counties tend to consist of mostly non-Hispanic white residents, although there are some with relatively high and growing percentages of Native Americans/Alaska Natives or Hispanic residents.

² Please note that we cannot disclose the locations of our survey counties or interviews to protect the identity of the communities described in more depth in some of our other research.

Table 1. Socioeconomic and Demographic Indicators for Study Counties and U.S. 2015, Percentage of Residents

	Amenity Rich	Transitioning	Chronically Poor	U.S.
Population Change, 1990-2015	19.3	10.6	-13.7	27.3
Population Change, Ages 25-34, 1990-2015	1.2	-18.3	-30.6	-1.3
Adults 16-64 Working (full-time, year-round)	41.1	42.6	36.0	47.7
Families with No Workers (past 12 months)	20.0	20.6	27.8	14.8
Working Age (16-64) Men by Disability Status	16.6	15.7	22.5	10.5
No High School Degree (25+)	8.9	9.4	21.5	13.3
Associates Degree and Above (ages 25+)	33.0	31.1	23.0	37.8
Median Household Income (in dollars)	45,876	51,505	30,021	53,889
Single Female Family Households	8.4	9.7	17.3	13.0
Children (0-17) in Poverty	22.2	21.0	38.4	21.7
Non-Hispanic White	83.4	83.5	62.0	62.3

Source: 1990 U.S. Census data, 2015 American Community Survey 5 year estimates

The Transitioning Areas in our study are places in the northwest, northeast, Alaska Panhandle, Midwest and Upper Peninsula of Michigan that depended on agriculture, timber, and manufacturing like paper mills or low skill textile or technical operations. Some of these places are growing in population and some are in decline. These rural places have seen working-class jobs and Main Street businesses evaporate, and as a consequence many younger workers have moved with their families to places with greater opportunity. If desirable natural amenities are there, the future economy is or will likely be based on recreation; otherwise many Transitioning places will probably continue to experience decline and outmigration. In many respects these Transitioning Areas are the heart of the rural U.S., hard hit by economic restructuring and the growing urbanization of the country. They once had a robust blue-collar middle class and a strong civic culture, but economic downturn is threatening both. Like the Amenity Rich areas, these are predominantly white rural areas, including some counties that are 96 percent non-Hispanic white. Again, there are pockets with significant proportions of Native Americans/Alaska Native and Hispanic residents.

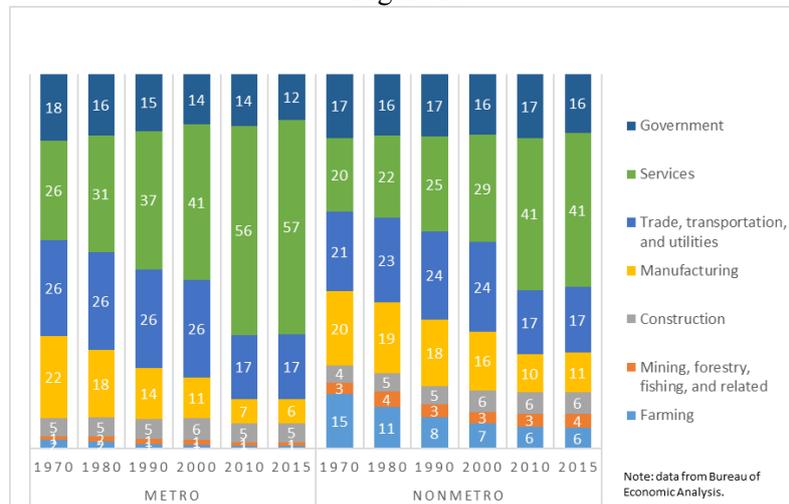
And finally, there are Chronically Poor Areas, like our study counties in Appalachia and the rural South – where educational attainment is low and economic hard times have been longstanding. Most have been steadily losing population for a long time. These places struggle with the burdensome legacy of neglect and often ruthless exploitation by local elites, and the longtime lack of investment in essential community institutions has locked the people and the places in chronic poverty. In the rural South many are majority African American communities. When those who can have left for opportunity elsewhere, they leave behind people with fewer personal and family resources (and a few who could leave but place their commitment to their community over opportunities to find better work). Over the last decade far fewer working age adults are working in these poor places – only about one-third – and the middle class and median incomes are comparatively small. These communities are both geographically and socially isolated. Relatively few newcomers have come, and long-time residents’ ties to the place go deep. Even today a few powerful families often control the economy and local politics. Education was not always available, or perhaps deemed necessary, to those from working-class families. Nearly four of every ten children living in these places are in poverty and one in five adults does not have a high school degree. These poor places also have a relatively high proportion of single mother households and higher reliance on disability and other government transfer payments than the rest of the rural U.S. While drug abuse and addiction plague all kinds of places across the U.S., here they are pervasive and affect the whole community. Conditions are very like distressed inner cities.

Demographic Changes and Economic Restructuring in the Rural U.S.

The rural U.S. has been losing population, in part because of outmigration, in part because of natural decrease (when “coffins outnumber cradles,” as Johnson (2011) puts it), and in part because rural areas are being absorbed by metropolitan areas. Around 60 million people lived in rural areas in 2010, 19.3 percent of the U.S. population. Twenty years earlier, in 1990, nearly the same number lived in rural areas, yet they made up about 25 percent of the population. The U.S. is becoming more and more metropolitan.

Since the 1980s, globalization and neoliberal trade policies have contributed to a restructuring of the rural economy, decreasing the availability of good jobs in rural places and changing the type of work that rural people do (Falk, Schulman, and Tickamyer 2003). More specifically, in recent decades the rural U.S. has seen the loss of manufacturing and agricultural jobs and an increase in service sector jobs (Brown and Schafft 2011). Production jobs were central to both the economies and the identity of many rural places. In 1970 20 percent of rural residents worked in service industries, but by 2015 41 percent did (see Figure 1). Additionally, the growing number of service sector jobs in rural areas are often part time, low-wage, and offer few benefits (Brown and Schafft 2011), meaning service sector workers often need to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. One interviewee in our Amenity Rich area explained: *You can't really sustain a year-long living here on rafting. When we first moved here, my husband was at [camp in area] and I had four different jobs at one time.*³ In addition to growth in service sector work, non-standard, on-demand, work in what some refer to as the “gig economy” is increasingly becoming the norm (De Stefano 2015). While many rural residents are accustomed to patching together different jobs in different seasons, the undermining of the core production sector industries has left rural communities without ballast.

Figure 1.



From 1970 to 2015 rural manufacturing jobs dropped from 20 to 11 percent of the jobs. In 1980 36 percent of jobs in Central Appalachia were in natural resources or manufacturing, and by 2010 only 19 percent were. In 1980 in rural Northern New England 37 percent of jobs were in those sectors, and by 2010 only 16 percent were. Jobs that do remain in some types of mining and manufacturing are among the highest paying (USDA 2016). Some local residents understand these changes are permanent, although they value the role of the industry in their community. A young man laid off from the mines told us,

I'm a coal miner too, and I know the future is not in coal. It's sad but true. It's not easy to let go of heritages. But if this county is going to succeed, to prosper at all, it's got to go beyond coal, because coal's over. A paper mill community resident told us, the heart of [this place] was the pulp mill and the paper machine that was there. That was devastating when it closed.

Some argue that small-town industries became vulnerable to corporate raiding, mergers, and acquisitions starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s, contributing to less industrial investment in rural communities and a decline of “anchor” family-owned operations (Alexander 2017). We saw this phenomenon in some of our communities, where ownership changed from locals to national and international entities, in many cases not even in the same industry. Orejel (2017) points out that in

³ Throughout the paper italicized font indicates that the words are direct quotes from interviewees.

order to attract industry, states provided tax breaks and subsidies which indebted state and local governments and ultimately undermined investment in local public institutions.

The rural-urban wage gap has also increased over time (Brown and Schafft 2011). Cramer (2016) argues that rural residents in Wisconsin reacted to these growing gaps with resentment toward urban areas and urban professionals who appeared to be doing much better and getting more of the benefits from the taxes rural residents were paying. While we did not find (or seek) evidence that our rural interviewees resented urban areas, we did find strong feelings that economic restructuring had changed rural communities for the worse, and nearly everywhere we encountered nostalgia for the lost economy of the past⁴. In fact, our survey data indicates that most residents of rural areas do not feel like they are better off financially than they were in the past – and indeed median income declined in some of our study areas. Only 30 percent were optimistic about the future. As good rural jobs dry up, more and more rural workers drop out of the labor force altogether. Labor force participation rates are now about 59 percent in rural areas compared to around 64 percent in urban ones (USDA 2016), and, as we will show, is even lower in some rural areas.

While the economic changes in rural communities have been occurring for decades, the Great Recession that started in late 2007 hit rural communities hard, and they have still not fully recovered. Rural employment remains well below its pre-recession level, while urban areas have experienced a much faster recovery in employment and by 2015 had reached 4 percent above the 2007 level (USDA 2016). Data from our surveys also indicates that concern about job opportunities grew significantly from the pre-recession to the recession/post-recession years. People in rural places of the U.S. feel these economic hardships personally and see them as they look at the closed up storefronts on Main Street. All of this may have contributed to a sense among rural residents that rural places are shouldering the brunt of the major transformations in the U.S. and global economy, and that government and most political leaders are not doing anything to help them transition to work in a new economy.

Data from our national CERA survey allows us to compare some perceptions that rural and urban residents have of the economic circumstances in their communities (see Table 2). For instance, significantly more residents of rural than urban areas were worried about job opportunities, population loss, and illegal drugs in their communities. And even as our rural survey respondents overwhelmingly plan to stay in their community, many would advise young people to whom they are close to leave for opportunity elsewhere.

	Metro	Nonmetro	Sig.?
Variables			
Job opportunities an important problem for community	73.4	80.7	*
Population loss an important problem for community	21.7	31.4	*
Believe community will be a better place to live in future	29.6	25.9	
Would advise teen to move away	40.4	60.9	*
Plan to stay in community next 5 years	74.5	81.0	*
Manufacturing/sale of illegal drugs is important problem in community	51.8	63.8	*
Notes: * indicates a significant difference by metro/nonmetro status (p<.05); The Office of Management and Budget classification system of nonmetro and metropolitan counties was used.			

Demographic and Economic Indicators in the Three Rural Americas

Among our study counties, demographic trends over the last few decades varied considerably (see Table 1). Worries about population loss correspond to actual loss (see Table 3).

⁴ With the notable exception of blacks in the rural South, for whom the “old economy” was oppressive plantation labor or unpredictable factory work.

Table 3. Findings from CERA Survey by County Type, Percentage of Respondents

	Amenity Rich	Transitioning	Chronically Poor	Sig.?
Worries/Concerns				
Population loss an important problem for community	30.3	54.3	60.8	*
Job opportunities an important problem for community	85.3	85.8	84.5	
Believe community will be a better place to live in future	30.8	26.4	26.2	*
Would advise teen to move away	65.6	61.2	67.6	*
Know someone serving in Iraq/Afghanistan	69.9	75.4	74.0	*
Feel worse off financially than 5 years prior	30.8	31.2	28.0	*
Manufacturing/sale of illegal drugs is important problem in community	60.4	60.5	79.3	*
Lack of health and social services a problem for community	38.1	35.5	51.7	*

Notes: Not all questions were asked in all iterations of the survey; * indicates a significant difference by county type (p<.05),but not which types the significant difference is between.

Our secondary and survey data also shows some real differences in economic circumstances by rural place type (see Tables 1 and 4). Some common themes and differences also emerged about perceptions regarding economic uncertainty and challenges from our studies of rural places. Worry about job opportunities was high and similar across all types of rural places. Most also did not think that their communities would be better places to live in the future, particularly those in Transitioning and Chronically Poor places. Similarly, many would encourage their youth to leave for opportunities elsewhere. While rural residents don't typically want young people to leave, they do understand that opportunities are more plentiful elsewhere. A teacher in Appalachia told us, *There ain't no jobs here...for nobody. You have to get out of town to do it. My son said, 'Mom, the only chance I'm going to have to make something out of my life is to just get out of [here].* A local elected official in the same community said, *The kids...know, the ones who have enough intelligence, that their ticket to life is to get enough education to get a job elsewhere.* For many rural youth serving in the military is a path to gain skills and even education.

Table 4. Findings from CERA Survey by County Type, Percentage of Respondents

	Amenity Rich	Transitioning	Chronically Poor	Sig.?
Economic Indicators				
Works full-time and has extra side job (if applicable)	26.1	31.0	19.8	*
Household work in informal economy in past year	47.3	55.7	42.8	*
Lost job in past 7 years (factory closing, position abolished, etc.)	13.1	13.4	15.4	*

Notes: Not all questions were asked in all iterations of the survey; * indicates a significant difference by county type (p<.05),but not which types the significant difference is between.

Financially, nearly one in three feel worse off than five years ago, and, interestingly, this feeling was greatest in Amenity Rich areas. Tied to economic distress, and leading to what some have called “deaths of despair” (e.g., deaths by suicide, alcohol, or illegal drug use) (Monnat 2016), there is real concern about illegal drugs, especially in Chronically Poor Areas (79 percent). People also see health and social services lacking, again with Chronically Poor residents being the most concerned. Given what we heard in interviews about the toll of local economic change, we expect that Trump’s rhetoric appeared to offer a return to the economy that had sustained rural communities, especially to those in Transitioning rural places and Chronically Poor Appalachia, although we do not have data on why people voted the way they did.

Work, Culture and Politics

Numerous scholars and journalists have written about rural cultural identity in recent years. Cramer (2016) argues that the rural groups she talked with in Wisconsin feel a deep antipathy toward urban residents whom they perceive as working less hard and benefiting more from government policies. She believes this resentment contributed to the conservative politics that elected Governor Walker, and later President Trump. She sees how politicians can take advantage of rural resentment, and turn it into votes. Her research shows that economic grievances are intertwined with cultural, geographical or community, and group identities. She found “a political culture in which political divides are rooted in our most basic understanding of ourselves, infuse our everyday relationships, and are used for electoral advantage by our political leaders.”

Rural strategist Davis argues that rural support for Trump reflected a shared rural identity rather than an assessment of what policies would best serve rural people. Davis (2016) writes, “people vote their culture, their church, their family, their neighborhood. Politics today is about creating, maintaining and expressing social identity.” The Economist (2017) featured a special report on “America’s urban-rural divides.” Politico (Evich 2016) wrote about the revenge of the rural voter: “After years of declining electoral power, driven by hollowed-out towns, economic hardship and a sustained exodus, rural voters turned out in a big way this presidential cycle — and they voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump, fueling the real estate mogul’s upset victory.” Similarly, the Denver Post (Simpson 2017) recently initiated a series on the rural-urban divide entitled “Two Colorados,” and their journalists report a distinct rural identity that included resentment.

Rural consciousness, rural culture, rural identity, rural lifestyle. To what extent is there a unique rural identity and culture? To what extent are we seeing working-class culture and identity? We find sociologist Ann Swidler’s (1986) way of conceptualizing culture helpful in answering these questions. She thinks of culture as a toolkit holding the symbols, stories, role models, rituals, and worldviews that we draw upon when we make decisions. She regards culture as more like “a set of skills and habits than preferences and wants.” Culture is what we know about what people like us do. It is about identity, the stories we have heard and the people we see, not just about values or customs that drive behavior. We found this view of culture helpful in understanding the behavior of the rural poor in our studies, and this perspective resonates with Davis’ comments about rural identity and rural voting preferences.

In rural communities work underlies culture. People work hard, and value hard work. Of course hard work is valued everywhere, but in small rural communities where people have known each other’s families over generations, families get a reputation about work. In Appalachia rich and poor people would tell us there are the good families who work and the bad families who “draw” benefits rather than work. These stigma stick, despite evidence that they are not accurate. Even those who work with poor youth and try to improve opportunity are discouraged by and critical of those they see giving up on work and despairing about ever getting ahead. Like Sherman (2009) finds in her northwestern U.S. timber community study, the poor who work earn a moral capital that is not ascribed to those who don’t. Of course, in reality there is not that clear distinction, but it becomes part of the local lore and community culture. Vance’s (2016) autobiography recounts both the structural obstacles to finding good work and people giving up on work to rely on transfer payments in the absence of good work opportunities.

Although rural areas face the economic challenges we have described, rural residents still express strong ties to their communities across the board. Few plan to migrate (see Table 5), and families, survey respondents and interviewees tell us, keep them tied to place, particularly those living in Chronically Poor places. *I mean a lot of people really just stays here ‘cause all their family is here*, a young woman in Appalachia told us. The quality of life as well as natural beauty and outdoor recreational amenities, particularly in Amenity Rich and some Transitioning Areas, also keep them there.

Table 5. Findings from CERA Survey by County Type, Percentage of Respondents

	Amenity Rich	Transitioning	Chronically Poor	Sig.?
Cultural				
Plan to stay in community next 5 years	77.5	77.3	71.4	*
Stay in community to be near family	72.1	80.4	84.6	*
Stay in community for quality of life	93.7	95.1	90.4	*
Stay in community for natural amenities	90.1	88.9	82.9	*
Newcomer to area (past 10 years)	37.0	27.1	19.7	*
Think their neighbors are helpful	94.9	93.6	84.6	*
Believe their community works together	85.3	83.7	72.3	*
Believe their community gets along	89.5	88.2	77.0	*
Have no religious preference	23.9	21.6	11.3	*
Consider themselves "born again" (of Protestants)	52.4	44.3	78.2	*
Attend religious services at least once a week	28.3	29.5	46.3	*
Belong to a local organization	52.9	49.1	41.4	*

Notes: Not all questions were asked in all iterations of the survey; * indicates a significant difference by county type (p<.05),but not which types the significant difference is between.

Rural residents value knowing and working with fellow community members to address local issues and investment in the community. A mill community resident explained, *You get involved in a lot because you've been here so long.* These feelings and behavior were evident in our survey data (see Table 5). These positive civic sentiments were significantly lower in Chronically Poor Areas, where residents were more likely to be focused on family and their “belonging” was church related. But even in poor places we found strong community ties.

Political orientation and views on political issues also varied by our rural place types (see Table 6). Nationally, rural residents tend to vote Republican. From 2008 to 2016, the share of rural people voting Republican increased from 53 percent to 62 percent (Kurtzleben 2016). When examining the percentage of residents in our study counties who voted for Barack Obama in 2008 in comparison to Hillary Clinton in 2016, we also saw greater support for Republicans. The most notable shift, however, was in Transitioning Areas where we have seen the greatest economic uncertainty in recent years.

Table 6. Findings from CERA Survey by County Type, Percentage of Respondents

	Amenity Rich	Transitioning	Chronically Poor	Sig.?
Political				
Belong to Democrat political party	39.7	35.8	47.3	*
Believe global warming/climate change has effected their community	53.0	51.6	50.2	
Believe conservation or environmental rules good for community	46.4	40.6	29.9	*
Think their local government is effective	47.7	44.9	52.9	*

Notes: Not all questions were asked in all iterations of the survey; * indicates a significant difference by county type (p<.05),but not which types the significant difference is between.

Our Amenity Rich Areas are somewhat evenly divided between support for Democrats and Republicans. For instance, in 2008 about 53 percent of voters in our Amenity Rich counties voted for Obama, 44 percent for McCain, and 2 percent for other candidates. In 2016, however, this had flipped to 43 percent of votes for Clinton, 50 percent for Trump, and 7 percent for others.

Among Transitioning Areas, voting patterns in our Midwest counties were distinct from other places. The counties we studied, as well as much of the rural Midwest, tends to lean heavily Republican, and shifted even more so from 2008 to 2016. Seventy-seven percent of voters went for McCain in 2008 and 81 percent went for Trump in 2016. In the other Transitioning Areas we studied we saw a flip from the majority voting for the Democrat candidate in 2008 to a majority voting for the Republican candidate in 2016, as in Amenity Rich Areas. Support for Republicans went from 43 percent to 51 percent and support for other candidates rose from 2 percent to 7 percent of the vote. Thus, overall, there was more support for Republicans in Transitioning Areas.

The Chronically Poor Areas we studied in Appalachia and the Northeast were predominantly non-Hispanic white and tend to vote more Republican. Votes in these places went more strongly towards Republican (60 percent voted Republican in 2008 and 70 percent in 2016). The Chronically Poor places in the Mississippi Delta and the Black Belt have more black residents and tend to be more evenly split between Republican and Democratic votes. There was only a modest dip in Democratic

support in these places (58 percent voted Democrat in 2008 and 57 percent in 2016). Both did shift slightly more towards voting Republican, and we saw increases in votes for other candidates, however, we did not see the shift in a majority voting Democrat to Republican as in the other rural place types.

In sum, while voting patterns differed across rural places, we did see more votes move to the Republican party represented by Donald Trump and we saw more votes for other candidates. While the contexts are different, we think our interview and survey data suggest why people in many of these rural place types wanted to see the economic shake-up that Trump said he would provide. The biggest shift from one party to another was in Transitioning Areas, where the recent economic uncertainty we have documented likely fueled feelings of discontent and need for political change. While Trump also stirred up feelings of cultural displacement and anti-immigrant sentiments, much of it was centered around the economic precariousness people were experiencing, and importantly, were feeling was not being acknowledged by political leaders. Our findings are consistent with Cramer's (2016): many voters are looking for change, change that benefits them, and for acknowledgment of the struggles they are enduring in the new economy.

Conclusion

We have described rural communities where the local blue-collar economy has largely disappeared over the last decades, as well as areas where residents have long been struggling to make ends meet. The mines, mills and plants are laying off workers or closing operations entirely. Where new industries have emerged, the jobs are not the same caliber as those in the past. Out-migration has increased, and younger workers especially are leaving in greater numbers. While some communities are faring better than others, these working-class communities are in distress. With the notable exception of oppressed minorities in Chronically Poor Areas, those who stay are nostalgic for the "heritage" of what used to be. These are people and communities who feel left behind by a new globalizing economy. Political leaders and policymakers have failed to respond to their plight.

Our research did not explore the extent to which there is a unique rural identity or rural culture, but how rural people feel about their economic circumstances, and through our in-depth interviews we have seen the way work in rural communities has been a source of pride and identity for people as well as places. Mining, paper mills, logging and even textile operations once brought decent jobs that could sustain a working class. There was pride in the hard work these jobs required and in the community culture they sustained. As those blue-collar jobs disappeared, just like jobs in steel or auto factories in the Rust Belt disappeared, workers and their families have seen their communities unravel. Those who stay have limited options for making a living, and struggle and "scramble" to provide for their families. While the response to change varies by the type of rural community and its economic history, its natural amenities, and its civic culture, fundamentally these rural communities are witnessing the decline of their working-class world. They long for the work and the communities the work sustained. They see a dim future for themselves and for the community they have known. If a political party, or a politician, claims they can bring back that world, it is worth a shot.

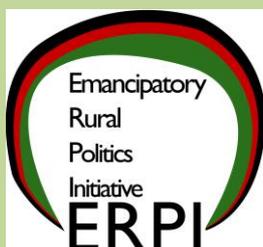
Future research might explore these questions about culture and identity in a variety of types of rural places throughout the U.S., considering the different trends economically, culturally and environmentally. There is also a need to better understand younger people in the rural U.S. – their circumstances, plans and perspectives. Much of Cramer's work in Wisconsin was focused on older rural residents, and teasing out the generational differences or similarities will be important. We find rural development practitioners and rural community organizers bring deep understanding and wisdom to their work in rural communities, and more research could better document and share their valuable perspectives. Together work like this could inform us about political currents, past, present, and future, and their implications for the U.S. as a whole in future decades.

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The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI) is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless ‘growth’, climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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