

The Roots of Political Resentment: An Experimental Analysis of Rural Consciousness and Racial Prejudice

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1 Introduction

Since the most recent presidential election cycle, rural Americans’ political preferences have become a subject of intense scrutiny and debate. Underlying this interest lies a seeming paradox: consistent Republican voting seems to be at odds with rural American interests in many ways, yet rural voters reliably support Republican candidates (Cramer 2016). The 2016 election and the presidential victory of Donald Trump has made this puzzle more salient than ever. Popular literature—J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* and countless New York Times op-eds to name just a few examples—as well as academic scholarship have attempted to provide answers.

One theory, based on an expansive literature, posits race as a driving factor in more conservative voting patterns by establishing racial resentment as a powerful motivator for conservative voters (Kinder and Sanders 1996, Tesler and Sears 2010, Hooghe and Dassonneville 2018).¹ Mendelberg (1997) and Huddy and Feldman (2009) extend this literature by quan-

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¹Hooghe and Dassonneville (2018) specifically look at the role of racial resentment in the 2016 election.

titatively measuring the effects of racial attitudes and the effects of racial appeals through experiments. Banks and Valentino (2012) extend this literature by establishing anger as the “primary emotional trigger of whites’ negative racial attitudes,” which coincides with the popular narrative that Trump voters in “flyover country” are angry (Shear 2018).² However, while there is extensive scholarship in this vein, others contend that race-based explanations do not capture the full story of why rural voters are reliable Republican voters (Sniderman and Tetlock 1986; Sniderman and Carmines 1997).

Katherine J. Cramer argues (based on an extensive ethnographic study spanning many years) in *The Politics of Resentment* that the primary driver of rural voting is a “rural consciousness” that sees rural interests as fundamentally opposed to urban interests (Cramer 2016). Cramer agrees with Banks and Valentino (2012) that anger is a powerful emotional trigger and often motivates rural political decisions; she describes current political behavior as a “politics of resentment.” However, instead of racial resentment as a driver of rural voter preferences, Cramer posits *rural* resentment³ as the more correct framework for understanding rural voters’ political decisionmaking (ibid). Cramer identifies three key (and ostensibly race-neutral) components of rural consciousness that are based largely on rural perceptions of distributive injustices on the part of the government: first, that political decision-makers largely ignore rural areas; second, that public resources are not fairly split between rural and urban communities; and third, that rural people are fundamentally different than urban people in terms of lifestyles and values (ibid).⁴

Cramer allows that racial attitudes do contribute to rural consciousness, but she contends that latent racial prejudices are only a small part of a much larger rural resentment towards urban areas (Cramer 2016). However, disentangling racial prejudice from rural consciousness is crucial to understanding the political preferences of rural voters; without distinguishing them, the two theories about what drives conservative policy preferences, especially in ru-

²Major news outlets often run pieces about rural Trump voters. For a few examples, see Shear (2018), Illing (2018), and Milligan (2018).

³That is, rural residents’ resentment against urban areas.

⁴See especially chapters 3 and 4 of the book.

ral parts of the country, are observationally equivalent. Cramer carefully notes that her methodology is ethnographic, suggesting that her study of rural consciousness could benefit from other research methods employed to answer questions of causality that an ethnographic approach is not able to answer. An experimental approach can provide quantitative analysis that can disentangle the relative roles of rural consciousness and racial resentment in political choices.

Using an experiment, we will attempt to answer the question: “Does racial resentment or rural consciousness better explain conservative policy choices, especially among residents of rural areas?” We will test white Americans’ support for a bond measure (paid through a small increase in property taxes) that would fund either rural or urban schools, using either white, black, or no children in accompanying pictures to estimate the relative importance of race and place in policy preference. We will also include a control group that receives the same article but without any primes; there will be no pictures and the benefits will be “statewide,” according to the control article.

The resulting coefficients from a regression of the dependent variable⁵ on treatment group assignment (along with pertinent controls and moderators) will allow us to estimate the relative effects of priming place- and race-based beneficiaries of the education bond measure. Having separately measured rural consciousness and racial resentment directly, we can then test whether and to what extent the primes are themselves moderated by rural consciousness and/or racial resentment. For example, we can test whether respondents with high rural consciousness and/or high racial drive the effects of the treatment cues. Cramer argues that rural consciousness is activated primarily by place-based cues; if she is right, the racial cues will not have heterogeneous effects that vary with rural consciousness. If her argument is incorrect, racial cues will be significantly moderated by both rural consciousness *and* racial resentment.

Cramer (2016) claims that racial resentment cannot be disentangled from rural conscious-

⁵See Section 3 for complete discussion of the dependent variable(s) used.

ness, but a population-based survey experiment (PBSE) has internal and external validity advantages that should make it possible to disentangle the two concepts in a methodologically rigorous way (Mutz 2011). Cramer (2016) challenges the conventional wisdom that racial resentment is a driver of white (especially rural white) Americans’ political preferences, and our study will assess her claims. Her study has several advantages qualitatively but has external validity limitations that our study will address. For example, in Cramer’s study there is no way to control for social desirability bias or sampling bias, as she only surveyed the most knowledgeable and active members of the communities. Our experimental design controls for these problems through random assignment and large sampling, respectively. Furthermore, ethnography does not lend itself to causal claims, which is a vital question when asking about the motivations for policy or candidate preferences. In contrast, a PBSE is very close to the gold standard⁶ for answering questions of causality (Mutz 2011).

2 Subjects

We will contract with the survey company Cint to deliver the study to the population of interest through Qualtrics. Our sample will consist of voting-eligible white Americans from across the United States. In order to closely model Cramer’s (2016) population of interest, about 60% of the sample will be self-identified rural residents. The remaining 40% will be evenly split between suburban and urban residents for a total target sample size of about 2,650. Before the treatment, we collect important demographic details, including age, education, income, and gender. We also ask a series of questions to determine connection to public schooling.⁷ Then, subjects will receive the treatment article and questions related to the key dependent variable: support for the bond measure. In this section of the survey, we also include manipulation checks to ensure that the respondents actually noticed the treatment. Researchers worry that questions meant to identify key moderators (such as rural consciousness and racial resentment measures) might prime survey respondents and muddle the experimental effects, so the questions related to those measures follow measurement of

⁶Randomized controlled experiments.

⁷by asking whether respondents have elementary- or middle-school aged children, for example.

the dependent variable and manipulation checks (Mendelberg 2008, Banks and Valentino 2012). Finally, we asked about other potential moderators, such as party identification, ideological identification, voting behavior, and a battery of economic questions.

3 Experimental Design

Subjects will be randomly assigned to one of seven groups including a control group (see below for diagram), which each received a different version of the vignette treatment: an “online” article about a proposed state bond measure to benefit schools statewide. Cramer (2016) explains that rural residents take pride in their local schools but worry that tax dollars will support urban rather than rural schools. Based on her ethnographic study, she claims that many rural people, though mostly conservative, would actually support tax increases to benefit rural schools if they had a way of assuring those tax dollars would actually benefit rural areas (ibid). Support for the bond measure therefore is ideal as a dependent variable. Questions of governmental use of tax dollars are policy questions that the literature would say is influenced by racial considerations, but Cramer (2016) shows that rural consciousness should also play a part in rural residents’ considerations of the policy (Kinder and Sanders 1996). Because it is reasonable to expect at least some support for the bond measure if it is described as benefitting rural areas, the dependent variable does not suffer from upper- or lower-bound limits in measurement.

The first of the two groups (Group A, the group that received “rural” primes) receive a treatment that suggested that the benefits of the proposed bond measure will be concentrated in rural areas. This is achieved through two main mechanisms: first, we use the phrase “sparsely-populated areas” when describing the schools that would especially benefit from the bond measure. Second, we insert three Photoshopped pictures in the article that highlight the rural setting of the schools. These pictures show rural school imagery—children boarding a bus against a backdrop of trees, a schoolhouse set against an open backdrop, and children walking down a rural path—to prime subjects’ rural consciousness. Therefore, the treatment is the message that rural communities’ schools will directly benefit from the bond measure,

and the independent variable is respondents’ perception of the level of rural inequality with urban areas in terms of which part of the state stands to benefit from the measure. The second of the two groups (Group B, the group that receives “urban” primes) receives a treatment that was identical except with wording and pictures that suggested the benefits of the proposed bond measure will concentrate in urban areas. The treatments within Group B will be functionally the same as they were for Group A, but the specific treatments communicates to subjects that urban schools will benefit. The phrase “sparsely-populated” is replaced with “densely-populated,” and the article includes the same images with a cityscape Photoshopped into the background.

We also divide Groups A and B into three subgroups: a “No Race (1)” subgroup, a “White (2)” subgroup, and a “Black (3)” subgroup. Subgroups A1 and B1 received a vignette that did not include a picture of any children—the bus, the school, and the path were the same— but there are no children present. Subgroup 2 included only two white children, and subgroup 3 included two non-white children. Subgroups A1-A3 hold the “rural” treatment constant while varying race, while subgroups B1-B3 hold the “urban” treatment constant while varying race. In this way, we will attempt to separate the effects of race from the effects of place in respondent support for the bond measure.

Table 1: Treatment Group Assignments (Control Not Included)

	No race	White	Non-white
Rural	A1	A2	A3
Urban	B1	B2	B3

We included manipulation checks to ensure the treatments are perceived by the respondents. We ask respondents to recall the races of the children in the pictures, to identify which part of the state (urban or rural) they believed would most benefit from the bond measure, and to state which racial demographic they thought would benefit more from the bond measure (equal benefit, white, or black). Simple descriptive statistics across groups will show whether or not the rural/urban and racial primes were noticed by the respondents.

The experiment by design results in six hypothesized levels of support for the bond measure within each of the six treatment categories. At the simplest level, the comparison between the A and B groups will show the effects of place-based priming on policy preference. However, holding group (A or B) constant allows us to see the effects of racial priming on policy preference by comparing relevant subgroups. For example, comparing Subgroup A2 with Subgroup A3 will show the effect (or lack thereof) of racial cues on bond support, holding everything—including place cues—constant.

4 Outcome Measures

The primary outcome measure is support for the bond measure. The dependent variable question asks: “How strongly would you support or oppose the proposed education bond measure?” Respondents will choose between strong/weak opposition or support. Also included is a feelings thermometer for the bond to capture higher levels of variation. Other outcome questions include:

- Support for a theoretical politician promoting the bond measure.
- Perceived impact of the bond measure on families like that of the respondent.
- General policy views.

5 Analysis

We will conduct the analysis in three stages to estimate treatment effects. First, we will run t-tests to see if there are simple, observable differences in the outcome variables between the treatment groups. Second, we will compute covariate-adjusted OLS regressions of bond support on treatment assignment with the following covariates: age, gender, state, income, education, children, ideology, rural consciousness, and racial resentment. Finally, we expect heterogeneous treatment effects based on a range of moderators (detailed in Section 7 be-

low)⁸, so we will conduct regression analysis using the same basic models from the OLS regressions but with interactions between the treatment group assignments and key moderators. The coefficients on these interaction terms will allow us to estimate the relative moderating effects of both rural consciousness and racial resentment following exposure to both race- and place-based cues about who will benefit from the proposed school bond.

6 Moderators

One of the most important aspects to this study is the effect of moderators. Although there are many potential moderators, racial resentment and rural consciousness are the key moderators in this study. Following Banks and Valentino (2012), we use Kinder and Sanders’s (1996) 4-item ANES battery, a widely-used measure for racial attitudes. As far as rural consciousness measures, we use three questions suggested by Cramer (2016).⁹ Cramer also helped design a survey in 2011 that quantified rural consciousness above and beyond the questions suggested in her book, so we augment the book’s questions with a question from the 2011 study that ask about respondents’ perception of government distributions of resources to their communities.¹⁰

Other important moderators include:

- Connection with public schooling in general– We measure this by asking respondents if they have children and if those children are enrolled in public or private school. We also ask how respondents feel about teachers’ salaries and the quality of education they believe their kids receive (if applicable).
- Ideology– We use a standard 7-point scale from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative” to measure ideology. We also measure party affiliation.
- Economic perceptions– We ask a battery of questions regarding economic security,

⁸We expect rural consciousness and racial resentment to be the primary moderators and we will thus focus the majority of analysis on these moderators.

⁹See Appendix for the full battery of rural consciousness questions.

¹⁰Badger Poll 32, UW Survey Center. See Appendix for exact questions.

taxation in general, and support for a 70% marginal tax on wealth above \$10 million.

7 Hypotheses

Cramer (2016) agrees with the broader literature that rural white Americans harbor racially conservative views and that these views impact policy, so this experiment should show effects of both rural consciousness and racial resentment. Cramer (2016) argues that rural consciousness and rural resentment are manipulated by (usually, but not always) conservative elites. These politicians often use racially-coded messages to incite anger against minorities and thereby support for conservative policies (Mendelberg 1997; Valentino et al. 2002; Banks and Valentino 2012). Cramer (2016) also argues that rural consciousness is driven by “a multifaceted resentment towards urban areas.” However, while her study does not allow her to disentangle the different elements of rural consciousness independently, we posit that rural consciousness can be divided into at least two distinct groups: urban resentment¹¹ and racial resentment. This leads to our first set of hypotheses (using elements from Table 1):

$$\mathbf{H1: } A1 > B1$$

Rural Americans will be more likely to support the bond measure when they perceive that the benefits will accrue to rural areas rather than when they perceive benefits will accrue to urban areas.

$$\mathbf{H2a: } A2 > A3$$

$$\mathbf{H2b: } B2 > B3$$

H2a predicts that rural support for the bond measure in Group A (rural) will be lower when the treatment suggests that non-whites will benefit versus when the treatment suggests that

¹¹We use the term “urban resentment” instead of Cramer’s “rural resentment” because she uses “rural resentment” to encompass multiple targets of anger, including race-, class-, and place-based targets. We want to convey through “urban resentment” the part of that anger that deals only with place-based resentment to the exclusion of race.

whites will benefit. Conversely, H2b predicts that rural support for the bond measure in Group B (urban) will be lower when the treatment suggests that non-whites will benefit versus when the treatment suggests that whites will benefit.

However, hypotheses H2a and H2b lead to additional questions. What are the relative effects when the article suggests rural nonwhite children will benefit versus when the article suggests that urban white children will benefit? Do urban racial differences matter more or less than rural ones? Further hypotheses are as follows:

$$\mathbf{H3a: } B2 > A3$$

$$\mathbf{H3b: } (B2 - B3) > (A2 - A3)$$

H3a predicts that rural support for the bond will be higher in conditions with white and urban cues than in conditions with nonwhite and rural cues. H3b predicts that the negative effects of nonwhite racial cues on bond measure support will be greater in Group A (rural cues) than in Group B (urban cues) relative to the control group.

Taken all together, H3a and H3b show how we expect racial effects to manifest within and across urban and rural contexts. We expect racial differences to matter, but we also predict that rural consciousness informs perceptions of race, especially for perceptions of non-white people (H3b). If true, this would suggest that both racial and urban resentment play a role in determining white tax policy preferences, which nuances our understanding of racial resentment.

Lastly, we will compare the relative effect of racial resentment versus urban resentment:

$$\mathbf{H4: } (B2 - B3) > (A2 - A3) > (A1 - B1)$$

H4 predicts that in both groups (A & B) differential racial cues will produce effects statistically distinguishable from the effects of place cues when compared to the control group.

8 Appendix: Rural Consciousness Questions

Below is the battery of rural consciousness questions. Respondents will see the questions in groups of three. The second and third groups randomize the order in which the questions are presented. Unless otherwise noted, all response choices are on 5-point Likert-style scales.

1. How much attention do you feel [state]’s government pays to what the people in your community think when it decides what to do?
2. How much do elections make the state government in [state] pay attention to what the people in your community think?
3. How well does [state]’s government represent the values of the people in your community?
4. Please fill in what you believe is the most appropriate of the options below into the following sentence:

“**Rural** areas in [state] are given _____ of government resources.”

- Much less than their fair share
- Somewhat less than their fair share
- About their fair share
- Somewhat more than their fair share
- Much more than their fair share

5. Please fill in what you believe is the most appropriate of the options below into the following sentence:

“**Suburban** areas in [state] are given _____ of government resources.”

- Much less than their fair share
- Somewhat less than their fair share
- About their fair share
- Somewhat more than their fair share
- Much more than their fair share

6. Please fill in what you believe is the most appropriate of the options below into the following sentence:

“**Urban** areas in [state] are given _____ of government resources.”

- Much less than their fair share
- Somewhat less than their fair share
- About their fair share
- Somewhat more than their fair share
- Much more than their fair share

7. When you think about people living in the urban areas of [state] today, how much do you think they share your values?

8. When you think about people living in the rural areas of [state] today, how much do you think they share your values?

9. When you think about people living in the suburban areas of [state] today, how much do you think they share your values?

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