

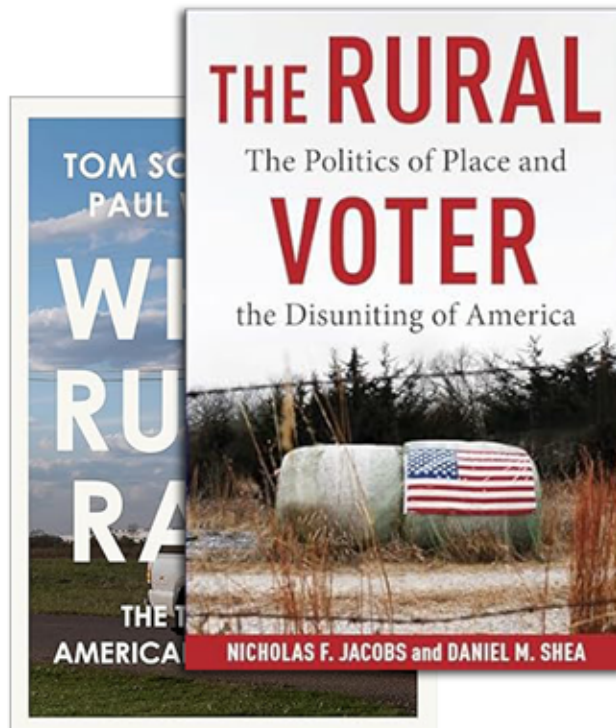


TDS STRATEGY MEMO:

**DEMOCRATIC STRATEGISTS: THE WIDELY DISCUSSED NEW BOOK
WHITE RURAL RAGE EMPLOYS A DEEPLY MISLEADING
SENSATIONALISM TO GAIN MEDIA ATTENTION.
YOU SHOULD READ *THE RURAL VOTER* BY NICHOLAS JACOBS
AND DANIEL SHEA INSTEAD.
IT IS A FAR MORE THOUGHTFUL AND PROFOUNDLY
RESEARCHED ANALYSIS OF RURAL AMERICANS.**

BY

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The extensive media attention that has been given to the recent book *Rural White Rage* is in one sense deeply ironic. Much of the book is actually an unobjectionable statement of long-held, progressive views – for example that rural areas have disproportionate political power in American politics, that rural areas face substantial and entirely genuine social and economic problems and that Republican politicians have done extremely little to meet their rural constituents' legitimate needs, offering them instead only cynical conservative "red meat" propaganda.

In fact, the book makes the entirely correct and important argument that Democrats cannot expect rural voters to switch their allegiance simply by running candidates who tout the latest policies and proposals produced by progressive think-tanks. Instead, rural voters need to develop their own authentic grass roots organizations that genuinely represent and reflect their distinct perspective and their communities' legitimate social and economic needs.

OK, so far, so good – and had the authors chosen to stop at this point they would have produced a useful progressive document.

Unfortunately, however, they decided to couple the valid points above with a shamelessly lurid, and melodramatic warning that rural voters were uniquely "*the major threat to American democracy.*"

The authors state that rural voters are:

...the least likely to accept notions of pluralism and inclusion,

...Uniquely hostile toward racial and religious minorities, recent immigrants and urban residents

...the most conspiratorial cohort in the nation..

Andrew Levison is the author of *The White Working Class Today: Who They Are, How They Think and How Progressives Can Regain Their Support*. He is also a contributing editor of *The Democratic Strategist*.

They say that rural voters express:

- ...a refusal to accept basic facts or scientific knowledge.
- ...the lowest level of support for long standing and essential democratic principles
- ...the highest level of support for, or justification of [political] violence,

They categorize rural voters noxious views in four categories as follows:

1. Racism, xenophobia, anti-urban disdain and anti-immigrant sentiment
2. Acceptance of conspiracies as facts
3. Undemocratic and anti-democratic beliefs
4. Justification of violence

They conclude:

...These impulses have caused millions of rural whites to embrace radical and revanchist ideas... the fourfold threat rural whites pose to American democracy is serious and growing.

In effect, this portrays most rural voters as fierce right-wing extremists – the kinds of people who stand in the front rows of Donald Trump’s rallies, howling out their anger at all Trump’s enemies.

Wow. Whatever else the assertions above may be, they certainly guaranteed the book a lot of attention and notoriety.

But the vital question that has to be asked is whether the authors actually provide the evidence for their case about the unique threat posed by rural white voters? They certainly claim that they have done so.

When we make claims about the threats posed by disgruntled, empowered, triggered rural white citizens we do not do so casually nor do we offer such claims by mere assertion or without substantiation. In fact, over the course of the book we cite a multitude of publicly available polls and studies to support our dire warnings about the rising anti-democratic impulses emanating from rural white America.

There are in fact a number of significant difficulties with the authors’ data (which will be noted in a moment) but even at the very beginning there is a fundamental problem.

The statements above clearly seem to suggest that “most” or “a majority” of rural voters fit the authors’ profile. If only a minority of rural white voters fit this description then the threat they pose is obviously of a different order than if they are a majority. As a result, the problem that most of the commentary on the book displays can be illustrated by a simple example.

Consider the following two (entirely invented) statistics.

15% of plumbers have mental problems.

10% of house painters have mental problems.

From these two statements which of the following two statements can properly be deduced?

1. Plumbers have on average somewhat more mental problems than house painters.
2. A majority of plumbers have mental problems.

Now, realistically, this should really not be a very hard question to answer but many of the reviewers and commentators on *White Rural Rage* can't seem to understand this distinction. They happily leap to the second conclusion – that “most” or “typical” rural voters are political extremists.

Consider this headline in the Daily Beast:

“White Rural Trump Supporters are a Threat to Democracy. A New Book Shows How Many Elitist Stereotypes of Rural MAGA Voters are True and Backed by Hard Data.”¹

Other reviews basically suggest the same thing.

But when one actually looks at the opinion poll data that the authors provide three things quickly become clear.

1. In many cases less than half of rural voters agree with the extremist view.
2. Even when rural support for the propositions above are higher than for suburban or urban voters, the different groups are often within 10 or 20 percent of each other.
3. The more extreme the view, the lower the percentage of rural voters who agree.

Take a moment and look back at the dramatic claims the authors make, claims they assert are backed by statistics. When carefully examined they are all based on comparing rural voters with suburban and urban voters and not on affirming that the views are actually held by the majority of rural voters.

Here are some examples from the book:

Support for Donald Trump's Muslim ban ran about 15 points higher among non- metro residents than among Americans who live in metropolitan areas.

Rural whites average feeling thermometer score of 30 for Black Lives Matter and the 54 thermometer score for urban whites represents a 24 percent difference.

¹<https://www.thedailybeast.com/white-rural-trump-supporters-are-a-threat-to-democracy>

62 percent of suburbanites and 71 percent of city dwellers agreed that “immigrants strengthen our country because of their hard work and talents.” Only 49 percent of rural citizens agreed.

60 percent of rural Americans support building a wall between the us and Mexico, significantly higher than the 46 percent of suburbanites and 34 percent of city dwellers.

49 percent of rural Americans – ten points higher than the national average – believed the QAnon theory that a deep state network was working to undermine Donald Trump.

33 percent of rural residents are election deniers, half again as high as 21 percent of urban election deniers.

Rural Americans were more likely to agree at 35 percent that “it may be necessary at some point for citizens to take up arms against the government” compared with 29 percent of city dwellers and 25 percent of suburbanites.

27 percent of the 21 million Americans who say Trump should be returned to power by force live in rural areas, significantly higher than the estimated rural population share of 20 percent.

As can be seen all of these examples display one or another of the three characteristics noted above. They indicate that rural voters are on many issues more conservative than urban voters—which is hardly a surprise—but they do not even come close to validating the notion that rural voters represent the major, imminent threat to American democracy.

And there are other problems as well. As Nicholas Jacobs, the co-author of the major study *The Rural Voter* notes, the widely different kinds of polls that the authors of *Rural White Rage* present use very different definitions of rural, urban and suburban, making the percentages in one comparison impossible to compare with those in another. In addition, many of the studies have extremely small samples of rural voters meaning that the margin of error is so wide that many cases where rural and non-rural voters appear to be different the results can simply be due to random sampling error.²

The result is that the statistics that the authors of *Rural White Rage* present simply do not prove the bold claims they make about rural voters.

Jacobs and his co-author Daniel Shay are the authors of *The Rural Voter – The Politics of Place and the Disuniting of America*, a far more extensive and deeply researched study of rural Americans based on an extraordinary 10,000 survey-interviews conducted over a number of years. Based on this research they present a far deeper and more profound analysis of rural Americans.

What they argue is that in recent decades a distinct “rural consciousness” has developed. It is not an abstract identity based on “rural” location in general or the idyllic cliché image of the typical American small town but on the range of very specific places that in the past created unique and distinct cultures and “ways of life” – the New England fishing ports whose culture

²<https://dailyyonder.com/commentary-white-rural-rage-which-came-first-the-title-or-the-research/2024/03/06/>

was shaped by the challenges of life at sea, the “big sky” cattle ranches in the west that supported the cowboy, the closely knit industrial small towns that stretched across Pennsylvania, Ohio and the Midwest hosting the culture of the post-WW II white working class, the logging regions of the Northwest that created the culture of the lumberjacks and the unique social culture of the mining towns of Appalachia.

As the economic foundation of these traditional rural environments declined the inhabitants of these places found themselves struggling to hold on to their culture and way of life. The result, Jacobs and Shay argue is that:

Rural Americans see themselves as a group on the defensive ready to come together and preserve what makes their rural community unique. The challenges confronting rural areas may not be all that special but the way rural Americans think about these challenges is..

Talk to somebody living out in the country and before you ask them how they will vote ask them what they think about where they live. You will discover a remarkable and unflinching sense of place...that sense of place helps rural Americans form their collective group identity. They identify with their place and that place is rural and for these Americans that sense of place is foundational to how they understand politics.

Even though there have always been rural voters only recently have rural voters nationwide come to foreground their understanding of politics in this belief that they are a distinctive people rooted in geography. This rural identity means that residents of rural America have developed a distinct sense of belonging or group cohesion. Rural identity has become so powerful that regardless of how much money they make, their age or their education rural Americans overwhelmingly vote together...

...It is a sense of linked fate. This concept implies a sense of connectedness, a cohesion among marginalized group members whereby individuals see their own prospects for success or fulfillment as depending on the entire group success or failure... This collective sense of place draws rural residents together especially when animated by stories of mistreatment or unfairness.

Much in the same way that [political scientist] Katherine Kramer noticed rural Wisconsinites making sense of politics through their own rural consciousness we to see a place-specific narrative of how rural voters make sense of problems in their day-to-day lives...³

The massive research behind *The Rural Voter* allowed the authors to examine rural opinion and psychology across an extraordinarily wide range of issues – social conditions, outlook for the future, social and community capital. Attitudes toward guns, hunting, patriotism, racism, religion, hard work, welfare, immigrants, women and Fox News. Their extensive sample made it possible for them to distinguish a specific subset of extremist rural voters – “right wing rabble rousers” – whose size they estimated at 7.57 percent of rural voters.

³The Rural Voter: The Politics of Place and the Disuniting of America
<https://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-rural-voter/9780231211581>

In a final chapter they survey the outlook for Democrats to regain support in rural areas. They consider various arguments for why the task is hopeless but they conclude:

One thing is undoubtedly clear. The rural voter is not the Trump voter...and the fact that ruralness is distinct from Trumpiness means there is a political alternative – an alternative made possible only if Democrats show up and compete in rural areas.

As a result, it is absolutely true that there is a vital, indeed indispensable book for understanding rural voters. But that book is not *White Rural Rage*. It is instead Nicholas Jacobs and Daniel Shea's study *The Rural Voter* that richly deserves this accolade.