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Abstract

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.[1] Using survey data of attitudes towards political and economic issues, and self-identified political ideology, two key questions are considered. Has there been change in the rural-urban divide in Nebraska as rural areas lose population? Second, does the rural-urban divide persist when controlling for party identification, age, and income in multivariate analyses? Bivariate results show that the rural-urban divide continues to be an important factor on several issues. The multivariate analyses reveal that the rural-urban divide remains significant when the issues are 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. 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 utilize this sorting mechanism extensively and reinforce it with electoral maps illustrating voting patterns by state. Originally used to identify electoral differences between states, the delineation now applies to cultural distinctions between liberal and conservative states.

[1]An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Western Political Science Association, April 17-19, 2014.

Researchers employ the red-blue state delineation in exploring political behavior across the states. Gelman et al. (2007, 365) point out that "states have real, significant cultural and political differences." Further, "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 America than in blue America" (p. 349). They find rich people in poor states more likely to support Republicans, but in rich states income does not explain voter preference.

In the third edition of *Culture Wars: The Myth of a Polarized America*, Fiorina (2011) 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, Klinkner (2004) argues that Americans are mostly 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 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* (2004), which provides an 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 academics have suggested that it is flawed. Gimpel and Karnes (2006) argue that Frank's 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 describe. They cite life and job satisfaction studies showing 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. They also argue that rural America has actually responded quite well to economic challenges such as globalism and that labor market out-migration actually helps keep unemployment in small towns lower than in larger cities. 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" (p. 471).

In addressing Frank's thesis, Bartels (2006) uses survey and election data to show reasons why white voters without college degrees have left the Democratic Party. 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, reflecting 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.

Walsh (2012) uses an ethnographic approach to examine why people might 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 more 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 their deprivation is due to decisions by urban elite who are disrespectful of rural citizens and rural life. For instance, in terms of increasing taxes on the wealthy, rural people are not against it because they believe the narrative that they might also be wealthy someday but rather 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" (p. 529). Overall, she notes that rural consciousness "can make preferences for limited government obvious, appropriate, and expected even among low income people" (p. 519). Walsh also notes that during her many conversations people did not focus on social issues and during her four years of study abortion was never mentioned once.

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 within 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.

The 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.[2] As of 2014, Republicans hold all three House and both Senate seats in Congress and all of the elected executive offices at the state level. While the unicameral legislature is nonpartisan, it typically contains a solid majority of Republicans. However, Democrats have had somewhat more success in some key local elections in urban areas. For instance, in 2012 the two largest cities in Nebraska, Lincoln and Omaha, had Democratic mayors.

[2] Calculated from information contained in *The Nebraska Bluebook.* Senator George Norris is listed both as a Republican and an Independent Republican.

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. Based on the data in Table 1, Republicans have not necessarily captured Democrats leaving the party, but rather those identifying as nonpartisan 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	Nonpartisan
1980	49.6	44	6.4
1990	50.5	42	7.5
2000	49.5	36.2	14.1
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% as middle of the road and 15.2% as liberal. In 2010, those percentages had changed only slightly to 44.9% conservative, 41.7% middle of the road and 13.4% liberal.[3]

The perception of Nebraska as rural is largely rooted in historical references. In the early years of statehood, 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 several decades 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 46% of Nebraskans lived in rural areas, but by 2010 that number had dropped over 9 percentage points (USDA, 2014).[4] Nebraska's population is increasingly located in three counties in the southeastern part of the state (which include the cities of Omaha and Lincoln) that account for over half of the state's population (Nebraska Blue Book 2011, 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 the changing nature of the rural-urban demographics in Nebraska will change the political dynamics of the state. While there is not much recent literature on the

[3] Data come from the University of Nebraska, Bureau of Sociological Research; however, the authors of this paper conducted the analysis presented here. Categories were collapsed putting those reporting very conservative with conservative and likewise for liberal. Those reporting "other" were dropped from the analysis.

[4] Calculated by authors from data provided online by the USDA, Economic Service Research.

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. Duffin shows 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 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 Senate election outcomes. However, this paper focuses on political attitudes of Nebraskans over time, place, party and demographics (age and income). We consider two research questions. First, has there been change in the rural-urban divide in Nebraska? Second, does the rural-urban divide persist when controlling for party identification, age and income?

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, for several decades.[5] Until the last few years the survey was administered over the telephone and now it is through the mail. This study employs unweighted data 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 BOSR from Survey Sampling International, with 3319 cases deemed eligible and deliverable and 954 respondents. The response rate for cases eligible and deliverable was 28.7%. The representativeness of the sample was acceptable in terms of the region of the state and sex but the survey overrepresents people over the age of 65 and underrepresents 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 are 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 underrepresented 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. This study measures rural and urban somewhat differently than typical. Respondents are categorized into two groups. The urban grouping consists of only three counties 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 centers of the state. This is important because Walsh (2012) reports that rural consciousness is rooted in the rural perception of elite urban

[5] The authors thank the Bureau of Sociological Research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for access to survey data, and accept responsibility for analysis and interpretation of the data and any errors or omissions.

status. If it is assumed that Nebraska has an elite urban status in the Lincoln and Omaha areas, 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 population centers of the state. There are other areas with growing metropolitan populations but they are not part of the commercial and political elite.

The dependent variables are measures of attitudes on selected 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 these attitudes, several relevant questions were replicated in 2012, with only a few minor modifications. A four-point Likert response set measures 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 self-identified 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 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, a set of logistic regressions assess how rural-urban currently affects political attitudes where the response set is dichotomized into those who agree and strongly agree into one group and those who disagree and strongly disagree in the other. Age, income, and party identification are control variables in the logistic regressions.

Results

Table 2 shows results from the 2012 questions for the overall sample. It is intriguing that over 77% agree/strongly agree that abortion is a private decision and should not be regulated by government. This is a counterintuitive finding as Nebraska is considered one of the stronger pro-life states in terms of legislation by the ranking of Americans United for Life (Ertelt 2014). Further, the Midwest (which includes Nebraska) is only behind the South Central states in showing the least amount of public support for abortion (Pew Research Center 2013). The results on abortion attitudes found here is possibly due to the question wording. Arguably the question is not a valid measure of abortion attitudes, as the statement is potentially leading, confusing, and/or double-barreled. On the other hand, it might be that while Nebraskans are against abortion, they are even more firmly against government regulation. Thus, the question might best be considered a measure of support for government regulation.

Nebraskans are typically patriotic and supportive of the military and about 50% support increasing spending on the military. Almost 54% disagree/strongly disagree in "strict" gun control and less than 47% reported support for prayer in public schools. There is a significant amount of support for sex education in public schools. Just over 54% support 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 (in percentages)

	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. For example, the 1982 chi-square in Table 3a signifies a statistically significant difference between rural and urban attitudes in that year.

Table 3a. Abortion Should Not Be Regulated By Government (in percentages)

	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 in both 1982 and 2012 strong majorities of Nebraskans agree/strongly agree that abortion is a private matter that should not be regulated by government. Interestingly, both rural and urban residents were much more likely to strongly agree in 2012 than in 1982. As noted, this is possibly measuring an anti-government regulation sentiment more than an abortion sentiment. 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 for military spending in 1982 than in 2012 but in 2012 the differential between rural and urban support widened with rural residents more supportive of increased spending. Table 3c shows that gun control perceptions have changed over time. In urban areas in both 1982 and 2012, about 60% agree/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%. Those who agree/strongly agree 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. Gun control has clearly become a very salient issue, particularly in rural areas.

Table 3b. The US Should Increase Military Defense Spending (in percentages)

	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 (in percentages)

	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 the 1982 data 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 more likely to strongly support sex education in public schools and strong support for sex education grew about 10 points in rural areas.

Table 3d. Public Schools Should Conduct Prayers (in percentages)

	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=346)	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 (in percentages)

	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=376)	27.1	53.2	12.8	6.9

1982 Chi-square = 49.222(.000)
2012 Chi-square = 21.142(.000)

The next two tables examine attitudes regarding 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. In terms of reducing services instead of raising taxes (Table 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 they were in 1982.

Table 3f. During Bad Times the Poor Should Take Care of Themselves
(in percentages)

	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 (in percentages)

	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, also moving into the moderate category. For both rural and urban there was very little increase in those reporting liberal.

Table 3h. Political Ideology (in percentages)

	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 dichotomized dependent variables are the political attitude questions from the bivariate analyses. The rural-urban variable is coded 1 (rural) and 0 (urban). Party identification has 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 responses 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, controlling for other factors. 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 (see Table 4). From the regression coefficients, odds ratios are 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 rural-urban variable has its most striking difference with regards to gun control. 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 provided assistance during bad times decreases 1.53 times for rural respondents and decreases 1.55 times for rural respondents when considering if government should reduce services rather than raise taxes.

The results from the control variables are instructive as well. When interpreting the control variables, it is important to note that the regression coefficients and significance values represents relationships between each respective dummy variable and the reference group. First, there are no real surprises when it comes to party identification. 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 a party identification but rather a group that perceives issues differently than Republicans.

Most striking in terms of age is that there is little difference between the age groupings compared with the reference group of those from 50-64 except for those under people under the age of 35. Compared to the reference group of those 50-64, respondents, the under 35-age group is about two times more likely to disagree that abortion is a private matter that should not be regulated by government. That same age group around twice as likely as those 50-64 to disagree with prayer in public schools and with gun control.

Income does not play a large role in explaining differences in attitudes and has no significant effects in terms of abortion attitudes and the poor taking care of themselves. However, there are some intriguing differences. Compared to the reference group of those making over $75,000, those making under $25,000 a year are about twice as less likely to disagree with prayer in public schools. In terms of sex education, those in the $60,000-74,999 bracket are nearly three times less likely as the reference group to disagree with having sex education in public schools. Those making between $40,000-59,999 are almost twice as likely to disagree with gun control and those making $25,000-39,999 are about two and a half times more likely to disagree that government should reduce services rather than to raise taxes.

Table 4. Regressions of Political Attitudes (Strongly Disagree/Disagree = 1)

	β	S.E.	Exp (β)		B	S.E.	Exp (β)
Abortion				**Prayer**			
Rural	.221	.190	1.248	Rural	-.397*	.166	.672
Democrat	-1.101***	.237	.332	Democrat	1.215***	.198	3.369
Independent	-.524*	.221	.592	Independent	.849***	.202	2.338
Age < 35	.668*	.289	1.950	Age < 35	.793**	.286	2.209
Age 35-49	.327	.247	1.387	Age 35-49	.411	.231	1.508
Age 65>	-.365	.238	.694	Age 65>	.026	.201	1.027
Income <$25,000	-.268	.291	.765	Income <$25,000	-.816**	.250	.442
$25,000-39,999	-.342	.329	.710	$25,000-39,999	-.529	.282	.589
$40,000-59,999	.184	.247	1.202	$40,000-59,999	-.288	.225	.750
$60,000-74,999	.017	.285	1.017	$60,000-74,999	-.164	.264	.849
Sex Education				**Gun Control**			
Rural	.535*	.227	1.708	Rural	1.097***	.173	2.996
Democrat	-1.634***	.320	.195	Democrat	-1.645***	.206	.193
Independent	-.859**	.266	.424	Independent	-1.080***	.207	.340
Age < 35	-.871	.505	.418	Age < 35	.655**	.288	1.925
Age 35-49	-.110	.316	.896	Age 35-49	.186	.238	1.205
Age 65>	.359	.255	1.432	Age 65>	.138	.209	1.148
Income <$25,000	-.274	.330	.761	Income <$25,000	-.206	.256	.814
$25,000-39,999	-.290	.363	.748	$25,000-39,999	.014	.275	1.014
$40,000-59,999	.035	.284	1.036	$40,000-59,999	.624*	.242	1.866
$60,000-74,999	-1.047*	.437	.351	$60,000-74,999	-.018	.270	.982
Defense Spend				**Poor**			
Rural	-.258	.169	.773	Rural	-.426*	.203	.653
Democrat	1.304***	.267	3.684	Democrat	.963***	.253	2.619
Independent	1.129***	.239	3.091	Independent	.333	.232	1.395
Age < 35	.375	.330	1.455	Age < 35	-.013	.343	.987
Age 35-49	.438	.267	1.550	Age 35-49	-.269	.268	.764
Age 65>	-.036	.257	.965	Age 65>	.080	.245	1.083
Income <$25,000	-.808**	.343	.446	Income <$25,000	.375	.309	1.455
$25,000-39,999	-.686*	.349	.504	$25,000-39,999	.080	.332	1.083
$40,000-59,999	-.506*	.266	.603	$40,000-59,999	.106	.265	1.112
$60,000-74,999	.150	.304	1.162	$60,000-74,999	.251	.321	1.286
Reduce Services				Model Dependent Variable	Chi-Square 43.21	df	p-value
Rural	-.438*	.177	.645				
Democrat	2.085***	.212	8.044	Abortion	81.83	10	<.001
Independent	1.136***	.212	3.114	Prayer	69.66	10	<.001
Age < 35	.038	.296	1.039	Sex Education	143.77	10	<.001
Age 35-49	.388	.247	1.475	Gun Control	86.14	10	<.001
Age 65>	.449*	.213	1.567	Defense Spend	26.17	10	<.001
Income <$25,000	.339	.256	1.404	Poor	139.26	10	.004
$25,000-39,999	.911**	.295	2.486	Reduce Services		10	<.001
$40,000-59,999	.069	.240	1.071				
$60,000-74,999	.132	.285	1.141				

*p<.05; ** p<.01; ***p<.001

The final regression is OLS with the dependent variable being a five point scale of liberalism/conservatism ranging from 1 (very liberal) to 5 (very conservative). As 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. Independents also report being more liberal than Republicans. The only age group that is statistically significant from the reference group (ages 50-64) is those under 35 but the effect as measured by the unstandardized regression coefficient (B) is not that strong. Interestingly, income groupings 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/.000***	-.645
Independent	-.798	.078	-10.213/.000***	-.346
Age				
Less than 35years old	-.271	.105	-2.586/.010*	-.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

*p<.05; ** p<.01; ***p<.001

Discussion

This paper explores two questions. Has there been change in the rural-urban divide in Nebraska as the state becomes less rural? Second, does the rural-urban divide persist when controlling for party identification, age, and income? Regarding the first question, crosstab 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 also 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 to raise taxes. 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 enter into the analysis.

As noted the control variables provide some interesting insights. First, on nearly all of the attitudinal questions Democrats and Independents have positions that are significantly different than Republicans. When comparing odds ratios Democrats are more strongly different from Republicans than Independents but there are important differences between Independents and Republicans. On political ideology it is not surprising to see that Democrats are significantly more liberal than Republicans. Those reporting being Independent also report being more liberal than Republicans, which is also to be expected. However, in total these findings suggest that Democrats and Republicans need to see Independents as a separate group that has differing views of issues that make them overall more moderate than the parties, at least on these issues. With Democrats having a steep decline in identification over time and Republicans having a strong but not increasing identification, Independents have become very important in elections and have the power to make the state more competitive.

Overall age does not have a strong impact on attitudes and ideology. However, those under the age of 35 are a group that is somewhat distinct from the reference group of people aged 50-64, at least when it comes to abortion, prayer in schools, gun control and ideology. Younger people take a more liberal position on prayer in public school but are much less supportive of gun control. On the abortion issue the results are somewhat difficult to ascertain given the question wording. If you look at the question as measuring abortion attitudes they are less likely to support a pro-choice position, but if you look at it as a government regulation question, they seem to be more supportive of government regulation. There are two important takeaways from this. First, the under age 35 is a unique group compared to the age 50-64 category and more research needs to be done as they do not neatly fit the liberal/conservative dichotomy. Future research should look at the differences between all age groups. Second, if the group continues to hold nuanced views, Nebraska's political future may become a bit more unpredictable for partisans. All of this, however, should be taken with some caution because the sampling in this survey underrepresents this age group.

Income is not an important predictor of attitudes, with a few exceptions as described above. While Gelman et al. (2007) assert that income matters more in red areas than blue when it comes to voting, it does not play a large role in terms of the political attitudes examined here. Since income is only a control in this study, more research looking at political attitudes and income directly would help address more clearly the role income plays in forming attitudes. Also, it would be helpful to see how income interacts, not just within political attitudes, but also voting behavior in the state.

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 lesser 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 how the rural-urban divide will develop if urban areas in Nebraska continue to grow while many rural counties continue a decline. However, it is reasonable to assume 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 capture 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 even when controlling for party identification, age and income might also be tapping into a rural identity that needs exploration with qualitative analysis.

Do the findings here help suggest how electoral politics might be changing in Nebraska? Duffin (2011) 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 increasingly urban, it is likely that Nebraska will again become a competitive two party system as Duffin speculates. However, the current landscape for Democrats is challenging as seen in the 2012 U.S. Senate election. Former Nebraska senator, presidential candidate, and national figure 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, potentially illustrating the findings of Walsh (2012). The differences between rural and urban were evident in this election, which show that if Democrats are going to be competitive, they will need to sell their message in rural areas as well as urban and in recent times they have not done that effectively.

The 2014 gubernatorial election provides an interesting test case for whether or not Democrats can appeal to the rural electorate. The Kerry-Fisher race pitted an urban Democrat against a rural Republican. This race matches an urban Republican, Pete Ricketts, against a rural Democrat, Chuck Hassebrook (Schmidt 2014). Ricketts grew up in Omaha (Schmidt 2014) and received his undergraduate education at the University of Chicago (Smith 2013). After receiving his MBA from the University of Chicago, Rickets worked in Omaha for the Union Pacific Railroad and later at Ameritrade (Schmidt 2014), a large Omaha-based brokerage firm founded by his father. His family also owns the Chicago Cubs (Smith 2013). Some Democrats have seized upon Rickets background, with their own moniker of "Wall Street Pete" (Schmidt 2014). His opponent Chuck Hassebrook grew up on a farm in rural Nebraska, was educated at the University of Nebraska, and spent his professional career working in rural Nebraska at the Center for Rural Affairs, which is a national advocacy organization that focuses on promoting family farms and ranches, along with rural economic development. Hassebrook has held elected office, serving for 18 years on the Board of Regents for the University of Nebraska (Schmidt 2014). If Hassebrook runs competitively, or wins because of a strong showing in rural Nebraska, Democrats may be able to see a future in rural Nebraska. On the other hand, if he loses soundly in rural Nebraska, it will be hard for Democrats to imagine a better candidate to get the message

to rural voters. If Ricketts does well in rural Nebraska it may mean that party identification and policy issues trump a candidate's rural identity.

Limitations

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 underrepresentation 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 other red states.

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