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**“I Don’t Think Either Side Gets It”: Rural Midwestern Women on Gender, Politics, and
Being Left Behind**
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Abstract

This thesis investigates how gender and geographic identity intersect to shape political behavior in rural American communities, with a particular focus on rural women. While rural political alignment is often viewed through economic or partisan lenses, this research highlights the deeper cultural, social, and gendered forces at play. Drawing on 12 in-depth interviews with women across the rural Midwest, the study explores how rural consciousness, traditional gender roles, and educational outmigration influence political affiliation and values. Findings reveal stark differences in how liberal and conservative women perceive the role of gender in their lives: liberal women frequently identify gendered limitations and cite reproductive rights and healthcare as key political concerns, while conservative women tend to view traditional gender roles as natural and unproblematic, emphasizing fiscal responsibility and self-reliance. The thesis also demonstrates how rural identity is shaped by feelings of exclusion from national discourse and by misrepresentation in media and politics. Ultimately, this project contributes to a more nuanced understanding of rural voting behavior by centering women's voices and highlighting the complex relationship between gender, place-based identity, and political polarization in the United States.

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Introduction

The Rise of the Rural Voter

The political landscape of rural America has long been characterized by unique voting patterns that differ drastically from urban and suburban areas. Historically, rural communities have leaned conservative, with voting behaviors often shaped by a combination of cultural, economic, and geographic factors. The rural voter was catapulted to fame following the 2016 election and in the eight years following. In the 2016 and 2020 U.S. presidential elections, rural communities played a decisive role in delivering victories for Donald Trump, turning out in record numbers to support the Republican candidate. Trump's campaign effectively mobilized rural voters by appealing to their economic concerns, cultural values, and frustrations with perceived neglect by political elites and urban-centric policies. In 2016, Trump captured 62% of the rural vote, according to the Pew Research Center, significantly outperforming his opponent, Hillary Clinton, in these areas. This trend continued in 2020, with Trump securing a similarly strong share of rural support against Joe Biden. Key issues driving this turnout included economic anxiety in regions heavily reliant on agriculture and manufacturing, opposition to progressive social policies, and a strong alignment with Trump's "America First" rhetoric, which resonated with rural communities' emphasis on tradition and self-reliance. These elections underscored the political power of rural America and highlighted the critical role of cultural and geographic identity in shaping electoral outcomes. Since the 2016 presidential election, research on rural voters has expanded significantly, driven by a heightened interest in understanding the political behavior that contributed to Donald Trump's surprising victory. Scholars, journalists, and policymakers alike have sought to uncover the motivations behind rural voting patterns,

particularly the strong support for Trump and the Republican Party. Central to this research is the question of why rural voters overwhelmingly favored policies and candidates that some argue may run counter to their economic interests.

Defining Rural America

First, though, it is important that we define what we mean by rural. The word rural has come to mean many different things throughout the centuries. In the 18th and 19th centuries, rural areas in the U.S. were primarily defined by agrarian economies and low population densities. During the early years of the Republic, most Americans lived in small, agricultural communities where farming was the dominant livelihood. The Jeffersonian ideal of a nation of yeoman farmers reinforced the notion that rural life was the foundation of American democracy.

The U.S. Census of 1790 did not explicitly define rural areas but instead focused on counting the total population. Over time, as cities grew, a distinction between urban and rural areas emerged, though early definitions remained simplistic—rural areas were often understood as anything not classified as urban. The Census Bureau did not officially define urban areas until 1880, which implicitly categorized the remaining spaces as rural. As the federal government expanded its role in economic and infrastructure development, a need for clearer classifications of rural areas arose. Several key definitions emerged. First, in 1910, the Census Bureau formally defined urban areas as incorporated places with 2,500 or more residents, meaning all areas outside this threshold were considered rural. This definition remained largely unchanged for decades but became increasingly inadequate as rural economies diversified beyond agriculture. During the period of the Great Depression and subsequent New Deal, New Deal programs, such

as the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) and the Rural Electrification Administration (REA), required better classifications of rural spaces to allocate resources effectively. By this time, rural America was not solely agricultural; many rural residents worked in small manufacturing industries or service-related jobs. The post-war period saw mass suburbanization, blurring the lines between rural and urban areas. The Census Bureau adjusted its definition to account for metropolitan areas, focusing on economic ties rather than just population size. This shift acknowledged that many so-called rural places were economically dependent on nearby cities.

Today, no single definition of rural exists—different government agencies classify rural areas based on their specific needs. There are around four main rural classifications across these different agencies. First, we have the Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) classification, by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), which defines rural areas as areas outside of MSAs (which are urban clusters with at least 50,000 people and surrounding counties with strong economic ties to the urban core). The Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) developed its own definitions for rural areas based on healthcare access, recognizing that rural hospitals and clinics faced unique challenges. The Economic Research Service (ERS) of the USDA further refined classifications to track rural economic trends, particularly as manufacturing, tourism, and energy industries became vital to rural economies. The USDA introduced the Rural-Urban Continuum Codes (RUCC) and later the Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes, which graded rurality on a scale rather than using a binary urban-rural classification. For the purposes of my research, I have utilized the OMB's definition of a rural county, which is a nonmetro county with a population of under 50,000 people that does not have substantial economic ties to a city.

Rural Gender and Politics

Existing studies suggest that rural political behavior is deeply intertwined with place-based identity—the shared sense of belonging and cultural values tied to geographic location. For many rural voters, this identity is closely linked to traditional norms, community ties, and economic conditions, such as reliance on industries like agriculture and manufacturing. Class dynamics also play a crucial role, with economic insecurity and perceptions of neglect by political elites shaping rural political attitudes. While much research has focused on rural communities as monolithic political entities, less attention has been given to the role of gender in influencing political preferences, especially among rural women.

Rural women occupy a distinctive position in these communities, navigating gender roles that are often influenced by traditional values while also engaging with broader societal shifts. Research on voting patterns has shown that women, on average, tend to lean more Democratic than men, driven by concerns over issues such as healthcare, education, and social welfare. However, within rural contexts, this trend may be less pronounced or complicated by other factors, including religiosity, family structures, and community expectations.

This thesis aims to address the gap in understanding how gender impacts political affiliation and voting behavior in rural communities. Gender quietly shapes the political lives of rural Midwestern women in profound and often divergent ways. Through interviews with women across five Midwestern states, this paper reveals how lived experiences with gender—ranging from traditional family roles to limited healthcare access—inform political identity in ways that are frequently overlooked by national narratives. While liberal women emphasized reproductive

rights, healthcare, and gender equality as core political concerns, conservative women largely framed their values around self-reliance, economic responsibility, and family structure. Yet despite ideological differences, many interviewees shared a common sense of exclusion from national political conversations and misrepresentation in media portrayals. These findings point to the need for more nuanced, gender-aware approaches to understanding rural political identity. The paper concludes by recommending targeted policy reforms—including expanded childcare and healthcare infrastructure, a more streamlined rural development system, and broader efforts to amplify rural women’s voices in both policymaking and public discourse. Specifically, this study asks: What role does gender play in shaping the political affiliations of rural communities, particularly rural women, and what additional factors contribute to variations in political preferences within these communities?

Literature Review

Rural Consciousness and Resentment

It has long been understood that rural communities vote differently than their urban or even suburban counterparts. Scholars have studied how characteristics like race, class, or ideology influence political identity. However, aside from all of these other factors, rural conservatives fundamentally differ in the way they prefer to live compared to liberals who often live in urban areas. Conservatives tend to prefer larger, more spaced-out homes in areas with limited immediate access to amenities like schools and restaurants, while liberals generally prefer smaller homes in walkable neighborhoods with nearby schools, stores, and restaurants (Pew Research Center, 2014). In addition to these differences, we can draw from the concept of

"concentrated population differences," which refers to the clustering of like-minded individuals in geographically distinct areas. This phenomenon is illustrated in Bill Bishop's book, "The Big Sort," which argues that Americans are increasingly living in communities that reinforce their political beliefs (Bishop, 2008).

Political commentators and sociologists alike often wonder why rural communities supposedly "vote against their interests," alluding to the fact that conservative economic policies typically do not benefit working-class, rural communities. However, an ethnographic study of 27 rural communities across Wisconsin provides insight. From her interviews, Cramer discovers rural consciousness, which encompasses perceptions of power imbalances, resource distribution, and distinct values or lifestyles tied to rural living. It involves a belief that rural residents are systematically disadvantaged compared to urban areas, with political elites (primarily urban-based) ignoring or devaluing rural needs and concerns (Cramer 2016). Rural residents see themselves as receiving less than their fair share of resources and political representation. They believe urban areas benefit disproportionately from state policies and tax revenues. Additionally, rural people have a different sense of personal characteristics from their urban counterparts.

Rural residents often frame their identity around hard work and self-reliance, contrasting these with stereotypes of urbanites as lazy or disconnected from rural realities (Cramer 2012). In a quantitative study, we see similar instances of strong rural resentment. Munis (2020) developed a psychometric scale for measuring place resentment—hostility toward outgroups perceived to receive undeserved benefits—among urban, suburban, and rural voters. From his findings, we understand that rural individuals often see urbanites as an outgroup. Many rural respondents express feelings of being marginalized and disconnected from the centers of power, resources,

and respect that urban areas enjoy. This rural consciousness elevates their awareness of inequities in political representation and resource allocation, making them more likely to harbor resentment towards urban populations and government structures perceived as favoring cities. Place resentment is most pronounced in rural areas compared to urban and suburban counterparts.

Interestingly, though, partisan identity does not significantly predict place resentment among rural respondents. Regardless of whether they identify as Democrats, Republicans, or independents, rural respondents tend to display similar levels of resentment toward urban populations. This lack of significant partisan alignment in rural areas contrasts with patterns observed in urban and suburban populations, where partisanship does play a role in shaping feelings of resentment (Munis, 2020). This new geographic cleavage is contributing to social polarization, creating an "us" versus "them" mentality that permeates political discourse. This sort of tribalism engenders strong in-group loyalty and hostility towards out-groups, a phenomenon that echoes findings in the literature on identity politics (Mason, 2018; Jardina, 2019).

Economic Decline and Political Realignment

Before we can analyze the motivations behind rural politics, we must first understand the evolution of the status of rural communities and their rightward shift over the past three decades. This shift has manifested in a growing political polarization that has become particularly pronounced since the 2000s, with the gap in support for Republican candidates widening significantly from just two percentage points in 1992 to 21 percentage points by 2020. Many say

the economic “downturn” of rural communities began with NAFTA. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), implemented in 1994, was designed to eliminate trade barriers between the United States, Canada, and Mexico, promoting economic integration. While it boosted trade and lowered costs for businesses and consumers, it had negative consequences for many rural communities in the United States, particularly in manufacturing and agriculture. These effects contributed to the perception that NAFTA accelerated economic decline in rural areas.

As globalization rose in the 1980s, with many manufacturing and agriculture-based occupations moving abroad for cheaper production, rural communities began to suffer. However, NAFTA is often cited as the catalyst for rural mistreatment. NAFTA allowed companies to relocate operations to Mexico, where labor was significantly cheaper. Many rural communities in the Midwest and South depended on small-scale manufacturing plants, which were shut down or downsized as companies moved jobs across the border. Even when jobs remained, competition with Mexican factories lowered wages in U.S. rural manufacturing industries. Many workers had to accept reduced pay to keep their jobs, leading to economic stagnation in these areas. NAFTA opened markets for U.S. grain and livestock, but it also flooded the U.S. with cheaper agricultural imports from Mexico and Canada, particularly in dairy, fruit, and vegetable markets. This drove down prices for U.S. farmers, making it harder for smaller farms to compete. Lower crop prices forced many small farms to shut down, leading to the rise of corporate agribusinesses that could operate at higher efficiencies. Many rural farming communities saw declining populations as family farms disappeared.

As farms consolidated, fewer workers were needed, contributing to job losses in rural economies that had relied on agricultural labor. Additionally, as wages stagnated and jobs disappeared, the local economies of many rural towns suffered. With fewer high-paying manufacturing and farming jobs, local businesses struggled, leading to the closure of small retailers, restaurants, and service providers. The shift in trade also benefited large corporations, such as Walmart and other big-box retailers, which could import cheaper goods due to free trade. These companies displaced small rural businesses, further contributing to economic downturns. As described by Mettler and Brown (2022), economic stagnation catalyzed a shift toward Republican candidates as rural voters felt increasingly marginalized by the Democratic Party, which was perceived as more aligned with urban interests. Rural populations that experienced economic hardships began to identify more strongly with Republican ideologies, which were framed as champions of traditional values and local interests (Brown & Mettler, 2022).

Another critical factor identified by Brown and Mettler is the growing educational divide between rural and urban populations. They present data illustrating how educational attainment in urban areas has significantly outpaced that of rural areas since the 1970s. By 2020, 35% of adults in urban areas held at least a four-year college degree, compared to just 21% in rural areas. (Brown & Mettler, 2024). This educational gap has substantial implications for political attitudes, as higher education levels correlate with more progressive social values and Democratic Party alignment (Iversen & Soskice, 2019). Data has shown that counties with lower levels of educational attainment were more likely to support Trump, as individuals without a college degree gravitated toward his promises of revitalizing the goods-producing industries (Albrecht, 2022).

Shifts in the U.S. economy have diminished the availability of high-quality jobs for individuals lacking advanced education, leading to economic disenfranchisement and a sense of alienation among rural voters (Autor & Dorn, 2013). Monrat and Brown (2017) draw on a range of data to illustrate how economic decline, rising poverty rates, and declining life expectancy have affected voting patterns. For instance, Monrat and Brown (2017) finds that Trump's support was stronger in counties with declining life expectancies since 1980. The deterioration of traditional manufacturing jobs has left many rural communities feeling abandoned, which may have fueled support for a populist candidate like Trump (Monnat, 2016). This perspective aligns with previous research that connects economic dislocation to political behavior, suggesting that voters in distressed areas may turn to candidates who promise to address their grievances (Hochschild, 2016). Monnat and Brown (2017) also emphasize the importance of socio-economic conditions in understanding the voting behavior of rural populations. They highlight that the rural vote has historically leaned Republican, particularly in regions such as Appalachia and the Great Plains (McKee & Teigen, 2009; Scala & Johnson, 2017). However, they argue that the 2016 election was marked by unprecedented shifts in the Industrial Midwest, where economic distress and social despair were particularly pronounced.

Race, Identity and Social Group Politics

Race and ethnicity also emerge as critical factors in understanding voting behavior, particularly in the context of Trump's appeal to non-Hispanic white voters. Albrecht (2022) documents the demographic shifts in the U.S., where the proportion of non-Hispanic white residents has declined significantly over the decades. This demographic change has fostered a sense of anxiety among some white voters, contributing to their support for Trump, who

capitalized on racial and cultural grievances (Jardina, 2019). Albrecht's findings align with the notion that Trump's campaign effectively mobilized racial identity politics, with substantial evidence suggesting that racial attitudes played a significant role in voter motivation. Albrecht (2022) argues that while economic factors played a role in shaping rural voting behavior, they were not the sole determinants. Rather, when controlling for educational attainment and racial composition, the direct impact of economic structure on voting patterns diminished. This suggests that cultural and identity issues, rather than purely economic grievances, are increasingly central to the political landscape of rural communities.

As humans, we are prone to social categorization. These sorts of categorizations between urban and rural communities are central to what is commonly referred to as the “us. vs. them” narrative in politics (Tajfel 1981). These social group identities as a result of categorization act as reference points for comparison and loyalty, shaping behavior, attitudes, and the way individuals interpret and prioritize information (Tajfel & Turner 1986). Social group identities also significantly affect how individuals understand politics, affecting their attitudes and behaviors (Conover, 1988). Previous scholarship has also shown that those living in rural communities typically fall along conservative partisan lines (Scala & Johnson 2017). However, this observation has led some scholars to wonder whether rural attitudes are then simply Republican ones.

A recent study using survey data on American adults from the 2020 American National Elections Study (ANES) found that Rural Democrats make up a substantial portion of rural Americans, with a Republican-to-Democrat ratio of roughly 3:2. The number of rural Republicans is similar to urban Republicans, challenging the assumption that rural areas are

predominantly Republican and emphasizing the need to recognize rural Democrats and urban Republicans. From this information, it was concluded that partisanship largely explains urban-rural differences in political issue stances, with rural Democrats being as liberal as urban Democrats and urban Republicans as conservative as rural Republicans. However, rural Democrats are less supportive than urban Democrats on issues like immigration, transgender rights, and income inequality, while still being significantly more supportive than Republicans in both urban and rural areas (Lin Trujillo, 2023).

All of this is to say, though, that rural communities are still overwhelmingly Republican. In 2000, the Republican Party had a slight 6-point identification advantage among rural voters, which expanded to 13 points by 2010. Since then, this gap has nearly doubled, with the GOP now holding a 25-point lead over the Democratic Party in rural areas. Looking at gender with regard to rural communities, very little data is currently available. Since 1980, a gender gap has been evident in presidential elections, with women consistently favoring Democratic candidates by a greater margin than men, ranging from four to twelve points. Since 1996, a majority of women have consistently preferred the Democratic candidate. (CAWP 2024). In rural communities, it has been found that women are less likely to support Republicans than men, with most recent data showing that rural women lean Republican 57% of the time, while their male counterparts lean Republican 64% of the time (Pew Research Center 2024). Notably, this partisan gender difference is the smallest among all three types of communities – urban, suburban, and rural.

Gender, Rural Labor and Political Engagement

Some scholarship exists on the attitudes that rural women often espouse due to their upbringing. In particular, the domestic role of women in rural areas is integral to understanding broader social relations. Rural women's studies scholar, Jo Little, explains that the domestic sphere is not merely an extension of women's identity but a complex domain that shapes their experiences and interactions within the community (Little, 1987). Drawing from Redclift (1985), Little asserts that domestic labor is fundamental to the economic system, challenging the notion that it exists outside capitalist production.

Furthermore, Little highlights the challenges faced by rural women in accessing paid employment. Her analysis indicates that job opportunities for women are often limited to low-wage, service-oriented positions, reflecting a broader trend of economic inequalities. The data from her 1987 study reveals that only 30% of households with a wage earner had a woman engaged in paid work, and these jobs were predominantly of lower socio-economic status than those of their male counterparts. This disparity not only reinforces traditional gender roles but also constrains women's financial independence and personal agency (Little, 1987).

Little also explores the concept of the "rural idyll," which romanticizes rural life and often obscures the realities faced by women in these communities. She references McLaughlin (1986) and Newby (1979), who argue that the idealized images of rural landscapes serve to reinforce traditional gender roles, positioning women as caretakers and nurturers within the domestic sphere. This ideological framework perpetuates a narrative that values women's contributions to family and home while simultaneously marginalizing their potential roles in public or economic spheres. The reinforcement of domesticity is further complicated by the decline in public services in rural areas, which places additional burdens on women. Little notes

that the lack of transportation, childcare facilities, and health services often confines women to their domestic roles, leading to increased isolation and a reliance on informal support networks.

There is limited data, neither quantitative nor qualitative, on rural women's voting patterns and the motivations behind their vote. Through my research, I hope to provide more clarity about the rural women's vote. Additionally, my qualitative interviews with rural women, rather than an examination of publicly available survey data, will provide a more nuanced perspective on the diverse, varying factors that may shape rural and female identity, as well as partisan affiliation.

Methods and Data

For my research, I conducted 12 interviews (Appendix A) with women involved in local county politics in rural areas, as well as women who are simply laypersons who live in their own communities. These women live in a mix of states across the Midwest, including Missouri, Wisconsin, Ohio, Kansas, and Iowa. Seven women self-identified as liberal or left-leaning, and five women self-identified as conservative. These women range in age, with two of them being college students around age 20, and the remaining five women were between the ages of 40 and 70.

For my outreach, I first began contacting personal contacts of individuals I know who have friends or family who live in rural communities, as well as any possible connections from my past involvement with rural-urban divide-bridging programs on campus. For context, during my first year at the university, I was involved with a rural-urban program called Bridging the Divide with the Institute of Politics (IOP), which brought together students from UChicago, Arrupe College, a two-year college in downtown Chicago, and Eureka College, a college in rural

central Illinois, also the alma mater of former President Ronald Reagan. Through this program, we participated in a series of weekend exchange trips including visiting students in Eureka, Springfield, and downtown Chicago. During each of these trips, other students and I visited historic sites, heard from local speakers, and shared the unique challenges facing our respective communities.

In January 2024, I also traveled to the Iowa Caucus in Des Moines, Iowa, and the surrounding community with the Institute of Politics. There, we met with local political, agricultural, and faith leaders who spoke to the small-town, Midwestern experience. Although I have never lived or grown up in a rural area, both of these experiences were foundational to my desire to learn from those who have backgrounds that are fundamentally different from my own.

Outreach and Interview Dynamics

After having minimal success with my first approach, I began to conduct outreach to rural county party chairs across the Midwest. To do this, I would use Google for the state and affiliated political party with a search such as: “Iowa Republican Party County Chairs.” From there, if available, I would view the list of county chairs, identify the rural counties in that state through another Google search, and then identify which of the rural county chairs were women. After that, I would reach out to the email provided to ask for an interview via Zoom or phone call.

In total, I contacted close to 100 women to request interviews. The majority of my outcomes from these emails were no response, with some women stating they did not feel comfortable being interviewed about politics. Those who did not feel comfortable with interviews were conservative-identifying. I believe that the general lack of response or lack of interest speaks to the greater political polarization occurring presently. Especially after the

outcome of this last highly contentious election, people may be wary of speaking with people they do not know about their intimate, deeply held political beliefs.

In particular, a couple of responses I received from friends from my hometown with rural relatives stuck out to me. In an effort to reach as many people as possible, I reached out to friends from my hometown with rural connections to ask if they had family or friends who would be interested. Two of my friends told me they had great women in mind who would love to talk to me, but they wanted to know what sorts of questions I would be asking or topics I would be covering. When I explained I would be asking about politics, I received replies from my friends that said: “Oh, well, she’s great. But she doesn’t talk about politics, so I don’t know if this will work.” These sorts of messages highlighted the taboo that still clearly exists around politics in rural communities, particularly for women. However, I found that the women I did speak to were very willing to share their experiences, often going into great depth about the specifics of their community, its dynamics, and personal tidbits that only locals would likely know. This is evident in the fact that a few of my interviews were reached through snowball sampling, where I asked interviewees if they had any women I could contact for an interview. In one case, one of my interviewees directly connected me to two other women whom I interviewed.

My interviews were conducted over a mix of phone and Zoom, depending on the preference of my interviewee. After receiving the consent of the interviewee, I record our conversation either via Zoom or Voice Memos, depending on the medium used for our conversation. Interviews ranged from forty minutes to two and a half hours, with the average interview lasting around one hour and fifteen minutes. I utilized a semi-structured interview format, asking all the questions included in my interview guide (Appendix B), but not asking questions if they had already been answered by the interviewee unprompted. Occasionally, I also

asked follow-up questions to gain clarity on a statement the interviewee made or learn more about a specific comment. Later, I uploaded these recordings into Otter for auto-transcription and proceeded to manually review each transcript and highlight pertinent statements for my findings.

Findings

This section draws from twelve in-depth interviews with rural Midwestern women to explore how gender and geography intersect in shaping political identity. The findings reveal that rural women experience their political beliefs through deeply place-based attachments, familial expectations, and varying levels of awareness about gendered inequality. Liberal and conservative women often narrated similar lived experiences—such as witnessing outmigration or fulfilling traditional family roles—but interpreted them in fundamentally different ways. Liberal women were more likely to frame their experiences as shaped by systemic inequality and emphasize identity-based political priorities, particularly around healthcare and reproductive justice. Conservative women, by contrast, often saw gender roles as natural or empowering and placed greater emphasis on self-reliance, economic concerns, and family cohesion. Despite ideological differences, many interviewees described a shared frustration with national politics, media portrayals, and the sense that rural communities are misunderstood or neglected.

Rural Outmigration, Gendered Expectations, and the Politics of Staying or Leaving

Interviewees across the political spectrum expressed a shared concern about the lack of growth in their communities. Regardless of political affiliation, many noted that economic opportunities are limited, infrastructure is stagnant, and local businesses are struggling to survive. A recurring theme in their responses was that young people are increasingly leaving in

search of better prospects elsewhere, contributing to a sense of decline and disconnection within these areas. Kim, a liberal Iowan underscored this trend with striking examples:

When I first started working here, we had four main physicians in our physician group, and between them, they had 13 kids. Between the four doctors, you want to know how many of their kids stayed here? Zero. Okay, we had a dentist back then. Do you know how many of his kids stayed here? The people who owned the supermarket? Do you want to know how many of their kids stayed here? None. The Superintendent of Schools. Do you want to know how many of his stayed? None. Or our neighbor a few doors down, Don was an attorney. Do you know how many of his kids stayed here? None. Zero. None of the children of the folks who were pillars of Kim’s community decided to stay in town and support the local economy. Liz, a conservative, echoed the same concern when asked if her neighbors stay in her community: “Not anymore. I think most people want to get out of here as soon as they are of age. The reality is that it’s because there's nothing here.” Jamie, also liberal, tied this trend to limited economic prospects: “Good jobs are a problem, just, you know, \$12 an hour is not enough to support a family.” She shared that her daughter, who is a prep chef, and her family moved to Cincinnati to earn more to support their teenage son, noting, “There’s a big issue of losing young people because they don’t want to live in rural Iowa.” All of these statements point to a larger trend present in the literature on the stagnation in rural communities, commonly known as brain drain. The phenomenon of brain drain is particularly acute in rural America, where a persistent outmigration of young, educated individuals is fundamentally reshaping rural communities. As rural areas struggle with limited economic development, declining industries, and underinvestment in infrastructure and education, many residents—especially young people—leave in search of greater opportunities, often never returning.

Carr and Kefalas (2009) spent time living in a small Iowa town, documenting how rural communities inadvertently encourage their most promising young people to leave. Educators and parents often push high-achieving students to pursue college and careers in urban areas,

reinforcing the idea that success means “getting out.” This mindset contributes to what Carr and Kefalas call a “brain drain pipeline,” in which talent is consistently exported but rarely returns.

Research from the USDA Economic Research Service supports this, noting that rural counties with the highest levels of outmigration are also those with low employment opportunities, limited educational institutions, and aging populations (Cromartie & Nelson, 2009). These conditions make it harder for rural places to attract new residents or retain existing ones—particularly those with college degrees or specialized skills. For the younger women, in particular the college-aged women, I spoke to, this sentiment rang true. Vicky, a student from rural Kansas who attends college out of state, describes what the trajectory is like for students in her town after they graduate high school.

In my small town, 50% of my class did not leave even for school, I would say 25% tried to drop out and then came back home, and then that other 25% I would say, maybe 5% of us went out of state to other colleges, and those are the same 5% that probably will not be returning. The ones that I'm confident will continue to stay in that community are the ones that either have gotten into financial despair and legitimately cannot leave, or the ones who grew up there, and their parents were the teachers at the high school and things like that, and they will just be the next generation of that. I would still say only about 10% of us would be considered to have Democratic or left-leaning views after college. These are the same people who left for college out of state.

Vicky's reflections highlight a compelling trend documented in political and sociological research: leaving a rural community—especially for college, and especially out of state—is strongly associated with developing more liberal or Democratic political views. This shift is particularly evident among young adults and women, whose political identities are often shaped by exposure to more diverse social environments, broader educational experiences, and “urban” cultural values.

Several studies support this connection. In particular, Bishop and Cushing (2008) argue that Americans are increasingly self-selecting into communities that reflect their cultural and political preferences. Young people who leave rural areas—often for college or early-career opportunities—tend to move into urban areas that are more politically liberal, and over time, their views tend to shift to align with their new environments. Gimpel, Lay, and Schuknecht (2003) show how political attitudes are heavily influenced by place. Their research found that individuals who migrate to urban and more heterogeneous environments are more likely to adopt liberal political orientations compared to those who stay in homogenous, rural areas. In a similar vein, rural political identity is often referred to as a politics of place, which causes rural residents to adopt political beliefs that they feel best represent their largely homogenous communities.

Additionally, we know that college education, geographic mobility, and exposure to urban life are all strong predictors of more progressive views, particularly on social issues such as gender equality, racial justice, and LGBTQ+ rights (Pew Research Center 2018). Even among conservative interviewees, many said they encouraged their children to explore ideas outside of their small town and recognized that for many high-achieving students, there existed limited advancement opportunities in their communities. These interviewees said things like: “I want my daughter to be able to know what life is like outside of our town” and “I always tell her [my daughter] to get the hell out of here when she graduates.” For almost all of the women I spoke to, whether liberal or conservative, they cited strong familial ties to their towns—often generations of relatives growing up there—as the main reason for why they chose to live there. Dana, a conservative, explained: “I only came back to raise my kids. I wanted to be near my family and it was safe. And, you know, like in hindsight, was it the greatest decision ever? Probably not. It's

worked out fine, but I hope that they leave.” These decisions are often framed not in terms of economic opportunity, but in relation to identity, caregiving responsibilities, and place-based belonging.

Sociologists like Jennifer Sherman explore this dynamic. She finds that for many rural residents, particularly women, the decision to stay or return home is deeply influenced by a desire to be close to extended family and to raise children in what is perceived as a safer, more morally grounded environment. (Sherman 2009). Similarly, Kendra Bischoff and Sean Reardon (2014) discuss how residential decision-making is shaped by social ties, noting that people often prioritize proximity to family and familiar cultural norms over economic incentives. These place-based attachments can lead people to remain in or return to communities with limited opportunity because the social capital—support networks, childcare, identity—is seen as compensating for material limitations. Cynthia Duncan (2014) also underscores the role of intergenerational place attachment, particularly among women, in decisions to remain in rural areas. Duncan finds that women often act as "kin keepers," maintaining family cohesion across generations, even when they recognize the economic costs of staying. This helps explain Dana's ambivalence—her return home was driven by family and safety, but she also acknowledges that she hopes her children will eventually leave for better opportunities.

Multiple interviewees described interactions with female friends or family who left their hometowns and began to adopt increasingly more left-leaning views. Dana told me about one of her best friends, a liberal woman, who grew up in what she described as an “ultra conservative” family in her hometown and then left the state for college and graduate school:

Even though they're both southern states, and, you know, she got her bachelor's degree in some highly conservative place, but I feel like at the UT (University of Tennessee) campus that wasn't the case. And so I feel like, you know, her world expanded in ways that it never would have had she stayed in central Missouri, and she was introduced to a lot of new ideas and beliefs, and she adopted those and that was the key to getting out of here.

Similarly, Kim, who is liberal, recounted a story of how her Republican friend and neighbor, the wife of a farmer, was taken aback when her daughters confronted her about her political beliefs:

What happened is her daughters grew up and moved to Minneapolis, and then it was in 2016 that she came to me and said, "You have to help reconcile so that I can vote for Hillary Clinton, because my daughters will never speak to me again if they find out that I voted for Donald Trump."

Another conservative interviewee, Stephanie, explained how she sometimes struggles to communicate about politics with her youngest daughter, who is much more socially liberal than her.

So, my youngest daughter and I just had a conversation. She moved away for school. She was getting upset with the bills that she heard were being passed that would put the doctors who perform abortions in person, and I said, well, first of all, Maggie, that's not going to happen. That's not what the bills do.

Urban and rural educational attainments differ greatly. In 2019, adults aged 25 and over in rural areas were more likely to have a high school diploma as their highest level of education (34%) than any other educational level. Only 25% had a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 37% in suburban and urban areas. In very remote areas, 13% had not completed high school, and only 19% had earned a bachelor's degree or higher, highlighting a significant urban-rural educational divide (National Center for Education Statistics).

Additionally, the 2016 Pew Research Center report, "A Wider Ideological Gap Between More and Less Educated Adults," highlights how higher education is closely associated with more liberal political beliefs—trends that help contextualize many of the intergenerational political shifts described in my interviews. The data show that among college graduates with no postgraduate education, the share holding consistently liberal views increased from just 5% in 1994 to 13% in 2004, and then to 24% by 2015. The trend is even more pronounced among those with postgraduate degrees, rising from 7% in 1994 to 31% in 2015. In contrast, only 9% of those with a high school education or less were identified as consistently liberal by 2015.

A stark gender gap also exists in educational attainment between women and men throughout the U.S. In urban, suburban, and rural areas, women are outpacing men by double-digit percentages in attaining higher education degrees at all levels. This gap is particularly pronounced in rural communities. Between 1990 and 2020, the gender gap in post-high school education widened significantly among rural youth. In 1990, 48% of rural young women had pursued education beyond high school, compared to 42% of rural young men—a 6-point gap. By 2020, this gap had more than doubled to 14 percentage points, with 67% of rural young women attaining post-secondary education compared to just 53% of their male peers. Over this 30-year span, the higher education rate for young rural women rose by nearly 19 percentage points (USDA Economic Research Service, 2022). We also know that women, in particular college-educated women overall, have become increasingly likely to identify with or lean toward the Democratic Party.

With all of this in mind, one could attribute the frequent out-migration of women from rural places as an important part of shaping the remaining political identity of these communities.

As more women pursue college degrees and leave rural areas for educational and career opportunities, the gender balance in these communities shifts—often leaving behind a higher concentration of non college-educated men. This demographic change likely influences the social and political climate of rural areas, making them more conservative over time. As a result, the remaining population may skew more traditionally conservative, reinforcing existing norms and slowing political change. This dynamic contributes to a feedback loop: as educated women leave, rural areas become more conservative, making it even harder for progressive change to take root.

Growing Up a Girl in Rural America: Gender Roles and Political Identity Formation

I specifically asked interviewees in what ways, if any, growing up as a girl or woman in a rural community affected their present identity, whether political or otherwise. My interviews revealed the powerful role of gendered socialization, including expectations of domestic labor, religious values, and community reputation, in shaping the identity of rural women from a young age. Many interviewees used this as an opportunity to share not only their personal experiences with gendered socialization, but also spoke to larger trends of expectations for women they witnessed in their communities. Interestingly, almost all of the liberal interviewees described their upbringing as marked by tightly-defined gender roles, while conservative interviewees noted that experiences with their gender were significantly less impactful to their identity.

Mary reflected on how gendered expectations in her rural community profoundly shaped her career trajectory and sense of self. Despite early ambitions to pursue a professional path, she encountered persistent cultural and structural barriers that steered her away from her goals:

So my original dream was always to become a lawyer. And then when I didn't stay in school and I got married, I went to be a legal assistant, and I was told that I could never get a job in my town as a legal assistant. So halfway through the program, I quit, which I just think is so sad that I did that. So of course, it shaped me totally. After that, I went to go work at a bank in town for the rest of my career. Anyway, I was one of the highest paid women in town, making barely enough money to get by. I had a guy tell me, he said, we do the same job, and I'm sure we probably get paid just about the same. And I said, if you can raise your family on my salary, then you're crazy to do this. And I went in and quit, because there was such a disparity in wages because he was a man, and he was raising his family on what he was making and doing not even half the work that I did. So, yes, it was massive for me being a woman.

Mary's comments reveal how deeply gendered rural labor markets, cultural norms, and institutional barriers collectively constrain women's aspirations and participation in professional life. Her dreams of becoming a lawyer were thwarted not by lack of capability or interest but by structural and ideological forces. This is an example of what Little (1987) identifies as "the unique influence of rural ideology on gender roles and relations: the intertwining of spatial constraints due to living in a rural area, economic limitation, and conservative social expectations that define the rural gender order.

The fact that she was told she could not find work as a legal assistant in her own town is emblematic of how occupational opportunities for rural women are restricted not only by supply and demand, but by cultural expectations about what kinds of work are deemed appropriate or "realistic" for women. Rural economies tend to reinforce a strict division between male and female roles, with women often relegated to local, low-wage, service-sector jobs (Little 1987).

Yet even within this "acceptable" domain, gender inequality persists. The speaker's account of wage disparity—where she performs the same duties, even more competently than her male colleague, but earns significantly less—exemplifies the gendered valuation of labor. In

Rural Geography, Little (2015) explains that rural spaces often preserve conservative ideas about masculinity and femininity, which inform workplace dynamics and wage structures. Within this framework, male labor—especially when linked to the role of “provider”—is perceived as more valuable, regardless of actual performance.

Like Mary’s experience navigating a male-dominated workplace and confronting the limitations placed on her professional ambitions, other interviewees reflected on how gendered expectations were embedded much earlier—within the structure of their schooling. These institutional norms not only directed girls toward specific forms of labor but also shaped their broader understanding of what kinds of futures were available or acceptable to them. Emma described how her high school curriculum formalized gender roles through distinct educational tracks:

If they're going to school, they're going to school for a very female role. So, like, my high school had two career tracks. For the boys, it was the agriculture track where you would go to do ag welding, and you would take all of the agriculture classes and do FFA (Future Farmers of America) and all of those things. And then for the girls, it was nursing. Like to go get a nursing career. The girls track also included the Home Ec classes, like the cooking class and the one where they teach you how to take care of a baby, and you have the baby that cries for 24 hours and stuff like that. As girls, we were never really encouraged to take different kinds of classes that might interest us more.

This quote illustrates how gender roles in rural communities are not only naturalized but actively reproduced through educational structures that track boys and girls into divergent and highly gendered life paths. It points to an institutionalized system that assigns value and direction based on gender—preparing boys for physical, “economically valorized” labor in agriculture, and girls for caregiving and reproductive labor within domestic and semi-domestic professions like nursing and homemaking (Little 2015).

Gender separation in education reflects what Little (1987) describes as the ideological function of the rural idyll, where the imagined community is “held together by normative gender roles and traditional values.” Within this idyll, girls are framed not as autonomous agents but as future wives, mothers, and community caretakers. The fact that Home Economics courses included training with crying baby simulators, and were effectively only offered to girls, further illustrates how schools act as mechanisms for rehearsing future domesticity, embedding the assumption that motherhood is the natural endpoint of rural girlhood. In this way, we can surmise that schools are not neutral spaces, but rather key sites of gendered social reproduction in rural communities. They uphold and renew the cultural meanings of gender, binding individual life courses to collective ideologies of the rural and its “proper” social order.

This kind of institutional gendering not only constrains immediate educational choices but also shapes how young women imagine their futures and relate to political and social structures. Girls trained for caregiving are less likely to see themselves as future leaders or economic agents, and more likely to view their primary value in terms of relational labor—a finding consistent with both Little's observations of rural gender regimes. Moreover, such early socialization may dampen political engagement unless countered by later transformative experiences such as higher education or out-migration employment.

Following Emma's recollection of how rural schools directed girls into caregiving and domestic roles through narrowly defined career tracks, another interviewee, Dana, offered a broader cultural critique of the expectations placed on girls in her community. Despite identifying as politically conservative, Dana expressed frustration with how gender roles were naturalized in her small town—not through overt pressure, but through a pervasive social logic

that linked womanhood to motherhood and marriage. Drawing from her experience as both a student and a teacher, she observed:

There's nothing wrong with being really family oriented. That's a beautiful thing, but I feel like in small town America, being family oriented means, or it doesn't mean but, it ultimately becomes girls really just seeing high school as what they have to get through, to get to marriage and kids. And I didn't have that same sentiment. I recognized it, though, in so many other girls that I went to school with, and I definitely recognize it in my students, you know, having taught high school. Girls, some of the smartest and most capable girls, would outwardly say, I don't even care if I go to college. I just want to marry a farmer so that I can be a stay at home mom forever.

Dana's reflection offers a rich entry point into analyzing the ideological construction of femininity in rural communities. Even as she affirms the value of being "family oriented," her critique reveals how this ideal is mobilized in a way that narrows women's ambitions. What is especially striking in Dana's account is her position as both insider and observer. As someone who did not personally identify with the dominant life script, she reflects on it with both critical distance and empathy. Her dual perspective—shaped by conservative values yet skeptical of gender essentialism—exposes the ideological work done by rural cultural narratives. As Little (2015) explains, the endurance of the rural idyll rests not only on institutional reinforcement but also on its internalization as "common sense." That some of Dana's students "outwardly say" they don't care about college and want to "marry a farmer" is not simply personal preference—it is a performance of intelligible femininity that aligns with the hegemonic expectations of their community.

Dana's articulation of rural girlhood as a waiting period before marriage echoes the symbolic and material marginalization of alternative feminine identities. The emphasis on

marrying a farmer in particular is significant; it reaffirms heterosexuality, land-based masculinity, and gender complementarity as the cultural cornerstones of adult life. In *Rural Geography*, Little (2015) draws on Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity to suggest that rural women become "culturally legible" through the enactment of roles that align with heteronormative and reproductive scripts.

We might assume that as notions of femininity, and the expectations for women to be mothers, have evolved, younger rural women have noticed shifts towards more progressive understandings of gender roles in their communities. However, this does not seem to be the case. Other college-aged and young adult interviewees echoed similar sentiments. Pam, a college student, said: "I have lots of friends who I grew up with who are now married or engaged, which is such a different place in life to where I am." Another young adult, Vicky, told me: "That's just how this community goes. You graduate high school, you get married and start having kids." All of these comments highlight the generational continuity of these norms. The fact that Dana now witnesses the same gendered attitudes in her students that she grew up with suggests that the cultural framework remains deeply entrenched.

One interviewee, Emma, grew up in a distinctly female household with a single mother and a sister.

I was raised by a single mom too. I had a sister, so I grew up in a house of women, which I definitely think was different, because, if I had grown up with a dad who worked on a farm, I would have been a lot more connected to my peers in that way, I think. I started working in fields when I was like nine, and I was paid less than all of the guys I worked with, which was very frustrating. I had to put up with a lot of rudeness from the guys I worked with and being called names by them.

Growing up in a “house of women” outside the heteronormative, nuclear family structure that dominates rural ideology placed Emma at a cultural distance from her peers. She did not fit the mold of the rural idyll which constructs the home as a moral center, organized around a traditional gender hierarchy: “the male head of this natural hierarchy... took care of and protected his dependents,” while the woman was “the focal point” of the domestic sphere (Little 2015). Emma’s reflection that she might have been more “connected” had she grown up with her father reinforces how family composition in rural areas is not only private but publicly meaningful—it confers or withholds social legitimacy and belonging.

Emma’s recounting of being paid less for field work than her male peers is also not an anomalous experience, but rather a systemic outcome of how rural labor is gendered. As Little (1987) and others such as Whatmore (1986) have shown, women’s work—particularly when domestic or care-oriented—is consistently undervalued or rendered invisible. Even when women enter into “masculine” labor domains, such as agriculture, they do not escape the symbolic economy of gender. Their labor is still read through the lens of femininity and, as this interviewee’s experience suggests, is often undercompensated and undervalued. Emma went on to say that much of her liberal political identity was shaped by being raised by a single mother and surrounded by a female-centered, ambitious home. She said:

I saw how hard she worked for us and she never placed any expectations or limitations on me or my sister because we were girls. She always encouraged us to pursue an education and our passions, even if it meant we were different from what everyone else was doing. Because of that, she really inspired me to be liberal and care about gender equality.

Growing up in a women-centric home—headed by a single mother who modeled ambition, resilience, and independence—provided Emma with a counternarrative to the dominant gender

ideologies circulating in her rural community. In contrast to the institutional and cultural messages that positioned girls as future caregivers or wives, Emma was raised in an environment that actively challenged those limitations.

Furthermore, the values modeled in her home—especially the emphasis on education and individuality—positioned Emma to recognize and resist the gendered scripts she encountered in school and in her broader community. The encouragement to pursue passions “even if it meant being different” is especially significant in rural contexts, where conformity to gendered and social norms is often enforced through peer culture and familial expectation. Emma’s experience thus exemplifies how localized, personal environments can serve as incubators of critical consciousness, even in the midst of broader conservative surroundings.

“She’s mouthy”: What it means to be a good rural woman

In addition to gendered expectations affecting social life, mostly liberal interviewees also pointed to how these expectations extended to women’s political involvement. Women spoke of both personal experiences with being outcasted due to their differing political views, as well as the general dynamic they witnessed that silences political dissent, or any opinions at all, from women. Several women expressed a sort of respectability politics that exists for women to be considered good wives and women – one that discourages women from speaking about politics, but encourages men. Mary explained the trends she sees among women in her community:

I think men are very vocal, comparatively, about their political views. Women, there's still a sense, at least in my town, that all men expect their women to be meek, and you know, the best ‘most respectable, upstanding citizens’ who are women, don't talk about it. I don't know that I ever hear women discuss politics around here, my best friend and I do, but not publicly. Outside of that, I don't think I've ever

talked to another woman about politics. I have to listen to men run on about politics, though.

Mary's reflection underscores the powerful role that gendered norms and respectability politics play in shaping women's political visibility in rural settings. Her observation that men are "very vocal" about politics, while women are expected to remain "meek" and silent, reflects a broader social pattern in which political discourse is not just gendered but policed through informal community expectations. For women to be seen as "respectable" or "upstanding," they must avoid controversial or public political expression — a standard that does not apply to men, who are granted cultural permission to be outspoken.

Women with vocal political views uniquely face gendered insults about their assertiveness and convictions. Vicky said she was always referred to as "the liberal bitch" by school peers and community members for her involvement in local Democratic politics. She explained that people frequently asked to be removed from classes with her in high school because she was liberal. Another interviewee, Eileen, described what it means for women to deviate from their silent norm:

Oh, I would say that most men around here would never, ever consider marrying a woman who didn't share his political ideology. It just wouldn't happen. I would say, still, as a woman in this community, if you were vocal, especially if you were liberal, you would just be seen as a mouthy bitch, like it would not be taken well, and there would be social ramifications. You would be an outcast, potentially your family. It would affect your husband. People wouldn't want to be around you. Yeah, men don't marry difficult women around here, and you're difficult if you don't share their views about pretty much everything.

This dynamic enforces a double standard where women risk social alienation for political participation, especially when their views differ from the community's conservative mainstream. This also echoes a broader theme across liberal-leaning interviewees: that political silence is not due

to apathy, but to a deep awareness of the costs of speaking out — costs not equally borne by men. A liberal or outspoken woman is not merely seen as disagreeable — she is labeled a “mouthy bitch,” a clearly gendered term that reflects both misogyny and political intolerance. The consequences of this label are not just reputational but structural: social ostracism, harm to family status, and diminished marriage prospects. The idea that a woman’s political outspokenness could “affect [her] husband” further underscores how women are seen not as independent political agents but as extensions of their families, whose behavior must not disrupt the patriarchal social order.

Vicky provides another revealing account of how gendered power structures shape not only political beliefs but also the social conditions under which those beliefs can be expressed:

It's almost like men are allowed to care a lot about politics, but women are only supposed to care if men tell them to. It's not ok if I make a post on Facebook expressing my views. But it is totally fine and accepted for guys to drive around with their MAGA flags on the sides of their trucks.

Vicky draws attention to a double standard in political expression: men are afforded the freedom — even the cultural expectation — to be outwardly political, while women are judged and often reprimanded for doing the same. This is symbolized starkly by the contrast between MAGA-flag-waving trucks (a bold and public political act that is socially sanctioned) and a woman making a political Facebook post (a relatively mild act that still draws criticism). The underlying message is clear: political expression is coded as masculine in many rural communities, and women’s political voices are either permitted only in private or must echo those of men.

Pam delves even deeper into this power imbalance, suggesting that many women are expected to cede their political autonomy entirely. She said: “For most women I know, the understanding is you should submit to your husband, do what he says, and vote for the people your husband tells you to vote for.” Female submission is not just a commentary on household dynamics, but on a broader cultural norm that devalues women’s independent political judgment.

Reflections from all of these interviewees are indicative of Little’s (2015) models of masculinity that value traits like authority and control, while femininity is equated with submissiveness and domesticity. Women are expected to be “practical and low maintenance,” and their social legitimacy often hinges on their ability to maintain the nuclear heterosexual family, supporting their husband's role and contributing to a stable community without disrupting dominant norms. Ultimately, the lack of political diversity in many rural communities may not stem from a true absence of differing views, but rather from the cultural silencing of those most likely to hold them—particularly women. Rigid gender norms discourage women from voicing political opinions that deviate from the community's conservative mainstream, reinforcing a homogenous political landscape. When political expression is coded as masculine and female dissent is met with social penalties, a culture of conformity emerges — not because everyone agrees, but because not everyone is allowed to speak.

Conservative Female Identity: Normalization of Gender Roles

On the other hand, conservative interviewees offered a much different picture of what life was like growing up as a woman in a rural community and the effects it had on their identity. Besides Dana, all the other conservative interviewees emphasized that they believed their gender

played a minimal and insignificant role in their upbringing. Unlike liberal interviewees, they also did not note any feelings of isolation or social ostracization if they deviated from traditional gendered expectations. Nina, a younger conservative, explained that women in her community do not face communal barriers to education or employment, but they are expected to support the functioning of their household, while men are not.

I think I got lucky to come from a community where people actually do things, and that may be because we're only an hour away from a larger city. We kind of grew up to get an education, do stuff like that at the same time. Instead, it's more, you should have a job and be a full-time mom at the same time. So, it's a little bit different. It's not like your full-time job is a mom. But you should be able to do it all. And I think that's kind of the expectations that are set. For women, it's more like what does their role in the household look like and they are the primary maintainer of the home. Women clean the table and care for the kids and men work on the cars. And I don't think that's necessarily a problem.

Nina is describing a form of rural gender ideology that emphasizes traditional divisions of labor but frames them not as oppressive or limiting, but as naturalized expectations that coexist with broader educational and professional opportunities. Her quote underscores the ways in which conservative women in rural areas may acknowledge gendered responsibilities—particularly within the household—without interpreting them as forms of inequality or constraint. Unlike liberal interviewees who spoke of feeling pressure to conform or who described tension between ambition and expectation, Nina sees these roles as compatible with personal and professional development. The assumption is not that women must choose between being a caregiver or a worker, but that they should be capable of fulfilling both roles simultaneously.

Her comments also reflect a sort of modified gender essentialism, in which women are encouraged—or expected—to participate in the workforce, but without a corresponding shift in

domestic expectations. In traditional gender essentialism, it is believed that men and women have inherent, biologically determined traits that define their abilities, behaviors, and social roles. This modified version of essentialism maintains the belief that women possess inherent traits—such as nurturing, organization, or attentiveness—that make them naturally suited for caregiving and homemaking, but they also can still earn an income outside of the home.

Ruth Gaunt (2006) identifies this modern expression of gender essentialism, in which women's participation in the workforce does not disrupt the belief that they are inherently better suited for domestic and emotional labor. Gaunt's study shows that parents who perceive caregiving as rooted in gendered biology are less likely to share child care responsibilities equitably, and this belief affects both partners' behavior. Moreover, Gaunt notes that gender ideologies alone (such as support for equality) are often not sufficient to predict caregiving behavior, unless paired with specific attitudes about fathers' roles and skills. Nina articulates this when she says, "you should have a job and be a full-time mom at the same time... Women clean the table and men work on the cars," and notably adds, "I don't think that's necessarily a problem." Her acceptance of this double burden reflects the normalization of a dual-role ideology, where working outside the home does not replace domestic labor for women, but simply adds to it.

The belief that gender plays little to no role in shaping women's lives was echoed by Liz, another conservative interviewee. When asked if her gender had impacted her experiences, she replied: "Yeah, I don't think so. I'm a woman and that's it. Nothing special. No one has done anything to me because of it." Yet in the same conversation, Lisa expressed concern over the decline of family life, attributing it to the rise of dual-income households:

I will say I don't think families or the family units mean as much as they did when I was growing up. And I think it's because both parents work. I think that was just kind of starting when I was in high school that mothers worked. Not very often did I find a friend whose mother was working.

While Lisa does not recognize gender as shaping her own life or limiting her choices, her nostalgia for a time when women stayed home reflects a deep attachment to traditional gender roles. Her belief that women's workforce participation is responsible for the decline of familial cohesion suggests an implicit view that women are naturally better suited for domestic roles. Without perceiving any inequality, Lisa sees no need for political alternatives, instead reinforcing a conservative worldview in which traditional gender roles are not only natural, but necessary for social stability.

Other interviewees noted that the way they presented as young girls did not affect their identity, or that they had never really considered how their gender affected them, often saying things like "I'm not sure I ever thought about it" or "I don't think it's really done much." One conservative interviewee named Stella shared that one of her friends, who I had also interviewed, told her she would likely be asked about how being a woman in a rural community had shaped her life. Laughing, she told me, "It's funny because Stephanie told me you'd ask me this—but I had never really thought about it and I don't really have an answer now." Her response reveals a striking absence of prior reflection on her gender, suggesting that womanhood, for her, was experienced as something ordinary and unexamined rather than as a source of tension, identity, or constraint. This lack of introspection underscores how deeply normalized traditional gender roles can become in certain cultural contexts—so much so that they don't register as something to question or analyze. Expanding on her earlier response about gender and identity, Stella said:

Yeah, I'm not sure I've ever thought about how being a woman has put me in a different position. I mean, I was always kind of a tomboy, so I really kind of hung out with my brother more than my sisters, so I'm not sure. Really, I've never felt like and I don't think most women feel undervalued or undermined for our roles. I just never felt that experience. You know? I mean, the people I work with are all great men and women, and they all have my back and you know, we work really well together, so there's just never been any type of gender issues with us.

Stella's response is revealing—not just for what it says, but for what it doesn't. Her initial surprise at the question, paired with her certainty that gender has never disadvantaged her, suggests a deeply internalized view that gender simply isn't a meaningful lens through which to interpret one's life. Her self-identification as a “tomboy” suggests that she may have found ease or acceptance in spaces typically dominated by men, allowing her to bypass some of the pressures faced by women who conform more closely to conventional femininity. The ease with which she generalizes—“I don't think most women feel undervalued”—also hints at a broader cultural norm of not naming or reflecting on gendered experience, especially in conservative or close-knit rural communities where these roles are deeply embedded and often go unquestioned. Stella's account reflects a kind of unconscious essentialism, where the gendered organization of life is so normalized that it becomes difficult to recognize as shaped, let alone unequal.

Stephanie, Stella's friend, also discussed her upbringing with similar insights to Stella:

So I mean, what's funny is, I was a kind of a tomboy growing up. So, I didn't wear dresses. I liked playing in the dirt. And I am not saying I didn't do any, “girl things”, but I loved playing in sports. I was kind of spunky. Had my hair short for a period of time. I was just very much a tomboy. And then, I don't know, like, I think in middle school, sometime maybe we started growing out of that a little bit. I was definitely outspoken about my beliefs in school, but that was never a problem and I think most people agreed with what I said. And I think nowadays, everyone in my town respects me and I feel totally respected and supported. My husband works for our family and I stay home and homeschool my son because I can provide him the best education possible.

Stephanie’s description of her current family life reflects a clear subscription to traditional gender roles, grounded in notions of gender essentialism. She proudly shares that she stays home to homeschool her son because she can “provide him the best education possible,” while her husband works for their family. This arrangement positions her as the primary caregiver and educator—roles historically coded as feminine—while her husband fulfills the breadwinner role, reinforcing a classic gendered division of labor. What’s particularly notable is the framing of her decision as not only natural, but optimal: she presents her role in her son’s life as uniquely suited to her, implying that mothers are inherently better educators or nurturers than others. This belief reflects the logic of gender essentialism—the idea that men and women possess innate, biologically based differences that make them naturally suited to specific roles. In this view, a mother staying home is not merely a personal or economic choice, but a fulfillment of her natural purpose.

Both Stephanie and Stella described themselves as tomboys growing up—playing in the dirt, enjoying sports, and gravitating toward male peers or siblings. This shared identity suggests that tomboyism offered a socially acceptable way to engage in nontraditional gender behavior during childhood, especially in rural settings where physicality and toughness may be more culturally valued. Yet, for both women, this tomboy phase eventually gave way to more traditional adult roles, indicating that their early gender nonconformity did not disrupt their alignment with conservative gender norms in the long term. Stephanie’s account also highlights how the social acceptability of being outspoken is deeply shaped by political alignment. She notes that she was “definitely outspoken about my beliefs in school,” but quickly qualifies that “most people agreed with what I said.” This is a crucial distinction. Her confidence in expressing

herself was not simply a reflection of personality or courage—it was enabled by the fact that her views aligned with the dominant conservative norms of her rural community. In other words, her outspokenness was validated because it reinforced, rather than challenged, the prevailing values.

This sharply contrasts with the experiences of several liberal interviewees, who often described feeling silenced, isolated, or even ostracized when expressing views that diverged from community norms—particularly around issues of gender roles, education, or national politics. For them, speaking out was often a source of social risk or emotional labor, not affirmation. Stephanie’s experience demonstrates that outspokenness is not inherently transgressive; it becomes subversive only when it opposes local ideological norms. In her case, being politically vocal reinforced her belonging and social standing—allowing her to be seen as both “spunky” and respectable.

For all of these conservative women, gender was not experienced as a source of constraint or inequality, but rather as a natural and often unquestioned part of life. Many described fulfilling traditional roles—such as raising children, managing the household, or supporting their husband’s work—not as limitations, but as meaningful contributions that affirmed their identity and place within their communities. These views reflect a lack of what Jo Little (2015) describes as critical consciousness—the awareness of how social structures, including gender norms, can shape and restrict individual choices. Because these women do not perceive themselves as disadvantaged by their gender, they see no reason to challenge the status quo, and in turn, they reaffirm the very systems that sustain traditional gender roles.

The absence of perceived inequality plays a key role in their continued alignment with conservative political identities, which often emphasize family values, personal responsibility, and clearly defined gender roles. In these frameworks, women are celebrated for their roles as caregivers and moral anchors of the home, while men are seen as providers and protectors. These women not only accepted this vision of gendered life—they embraced it. Without a sense that their opportunities have been limited or shaped by systemic inequality, these women saw little need for critique that might challenge this. In this way, traditional gender roles and conservative politics become mutually reinforcing, grounded in the belief that what exists is not only natural, but right.

“Have you ever eaten a horse?”: Misrepresentation of rural communities

Although my interviewees had a diverse range of political beliefs, almost all seemed to agree on one thing. Across the political spectrum, interviewees expressed a shared frustration with how rural communities are represented—or more often, misrepresented—by both the media and political leaders. Despite their differing views on gender, family, and policy, both liberal and conservative women conveyed a sense of being overlooked, misunderstood, or stereotyped by those in positions of power. This disconnect between lived rural experience and public discourse fostered a strong sense of alienation from national narratives, especially those shaped by urban-centered institutions. Whether it was through depictions in television, political campaigns, or policy decisions, interviewees consistently felt that outsiders failed to grasp the complexity, strength, and values of rural life.

In particular, liberals were not hesitant to critique Democratic Party politicians for not understanding the unique needs of rural communities. Vicky, a liberal interviewee, conveyed her disdain towards her Congresswoman's approach to interacting with her rural constituents:

She had not visited any of the rural counties in the district the entire time that she represented us for her first term, never, she never even set foot on farmland, because she also represents a lot of Kansas City and a lot of the more urban or suburban areas. Sharice Davids hasn't even bothered to have a single thought about Kansas farmers or farm subsidies or grain prices or any of those things she doesn't talk about because she doesn't know about it, because she's not from these communities. And like, as much as I love her and I voted for her, and I'm glad that she was elected, she doesn't, I don't think really represent my family's reality at all.

Vicky's quote underscores a recurring theme in many of the interviews: the perception that national politicians, particularly those in the Democratic Party, fail to understand or meaningfully engage with the realities of rural life. Despite expressing support for Sharice Davids and voting for her, Vicky feels that Davids is disconnected from the agricultural and economic concerns that shape her community's daily life. Her critique does not stem from ideological opposition, but from a sense of geographic and cultural distance—a belief that rural voices are an afterthought in political districts dominated by urban and suburban constituencies.

This tension illustrates a broader challenge for the Democratic Party: while it may enjoy strong support in cities and among diverse coalitions, it often struggles to translate its platform into language and policies that feel relevant to rural voters. Even when rural residents are politically aligned with Democratic values, as Vicky is, they may feel unseen or unrepresented by the party's priorities and public messaging.

Both liberal and conservative interviewees expressed skepticism toward the media's portrayal of rural life. While their reasons varied, there was a shared belief that rural communities are either misrepresented, ignored, or unfairly judged in national media coverage. Conservative interviewees like Stella and Lisa emphasized how media bias distorts public perception of rural people, particularly those with right-leaning political views. Stella said, "I don't think the media should be disparaging people in any faction... They preach compassion and understanding, but if you don't politically align with them, you seem to get hammered more than anything else." Her comments suggest a frustration with the perceived hypocrisy of mainstream media—claiming to promote empathy and inclusion while marginalizing or mocking those who hold conservative and rural identities.

Lisa echoed this sentiment with even sharper criticism: "No, I don't think the news is accurate at all... it's clear that they lean to the left, their bias comes through." She went on to say that she only gets her news from "podcasts and independent news venues." Her distrust of major news outlets and turn toward independent media reflects a broader trend among rural conservatives who feel alienated from mainstream narratives. More and more people on the right are turning to podcasts and alternative news sites to receive, with close to half of Republicans reporting that they trust podcasts more than mainstream media (Pew Research Center 2023). For Liz, the media not only fails to represent rural concerns—it actively misleads, with partisan intentions that further widen the cultural and political divide.

Yet even liberal interviewees, like Pam, shared a sense of being overlooked. "I feel like I just don't hear a lot of conversations about rural areas in general and politics... I hear more conversations about urban issues and less conversations about rural-specific issues." While Pam

does not accuse the media of bias in the same way as Stella or Liz, she still identifies a notable absence of rural voices in political discourse and points to a larger trend in rural communities where individuals feel as though urban interests are placed above their own.

Two college students whom I interviewed, one liberal and one conservative, both spoke about the ignorant and hurtful comments they heard from peers at their colleges as well as the rhetoric they have heard about rural people in the media. Emma, a liberal interviewee, recounted some of the most blatant examples of this rural stereotyping and reflected on how these assumptions create cultural distance between rural and urban Americans:

I've been asked: Have you ever eaten a horse? I've been asked that by like, oh my gosh, three different people. So I definitely think people have this mentality of oh you people are so different from us, who grew up in cities and things like that. I don't think it necessarily should be like that. I think now in the age of media and everything that people are more connected and people shouldn't feel such a disconnect from the rural areas and knowing where your food is being made. Yeah, so I definitely think that the idea of the media is like: Oh, it's just this far away place, not that many people live there. And these people are so backward. That's wrong, though, because people in rural areas still have big ideas and aspirations for making positive life impacts and things. So, yeah, I think that should be more appreciated.

Emma's experience illustrates the deep cultural misconceptions that rural Americans often face—portrayed as primitive, uneducated, or “backward” by people who live in urban areas and consume media narratives that rarely challenge these stereotypes. The absurdity of being asked if she's eaten a horse highlights the extent to which rural life is exoticized or mocked by outsiders. These assumptions reduce rural people to caricatures, erasing the complexity and ambition Emma so clearly affirms exists within her community. Her reflection that people are “more connected” than ever through media, yet remain divided by misunderstanding, speaks to a

paradox of visibility: rural areas are increasingly present in political rhetoric and media imagery, but often only as symbols of dysfunction, nostalgia, or opposition.

This sense of disconnect between rural and urban communities was not only evident in how interviewees discussed the media and national politics—it also surfaced in how they described educational and cultural divides. Interviewees noted feeling overlooked or dismissed in academic and policy conversations, particularly when rural knowledge or experience was absent or misunderstood. Nina, a conservative interviewee, described this frustration in relation to her college experience:

But I often find myself listening to college conversations and being like, hey, hey, wait a second, you're forgetting this entire community of people, or this entire situation, or listening to people rail about GMOs, but they don't actually know what GMOs are and how they work. And I learned that in my high school ag class, because I had one of those, and they didn't.

Her frustration reveals how rural people can feel erased or condescended to in conversations that claim to be inclusive or informed, but which ignore or misrepresent the realities of rural life. The example of GMOs is especially telling: while rural students like Nina may gain firsthand, science-based knowledge through agricultural education, she encounters peers who condemn GMOs without understanding their scientific basis—highlighting a perceived disconnect between ideology and lived experience.

Nina's reaction aligns with the “us versus them” (Mason, 2018; Jardina, 2019) dynamic found in the literature on rural identity, where rural people are alienated from urban institutions that dominate public discourse and policymaking. Her critique is not just about being left out of a conversation—it's about how urban normativity, or the assumption that urban experience is the default or ideal, and rural experiences are secondary and deviant, routinely sidelines rural voices

and perspectives. Additionally, the concept of urbanormativity highlights how urban communities exploit rural resources, particularly in terms of food production and natural resources, sentiments echoed by both Emma and Nina when discussing GMOs and food. In this framework, the lived realities of rural people are seen as peripheral, even in spaces that claim to be inclusive or equitable. Nina's experience illustrates how educational and cultural institutions can unintentionally perpetuate rural exclusion, reinforcing the sense among rural individuals that their knowledge and contributions are undervalued. This marginalization deepens the cultural rift between rural and urban communities, contributing to growing distrust, resentment, and the entrenchment of political polarization.

Following this sense of political polarization, Emma described in detail how she does not feel that either major political party in the U.S. understands what rural communities need:

I'll go with no, probably on either side. I think that Democrats do not have a very nuanced understanding of the issues in rural areas. Where I live, people still don't have Wi-Fi. At my house, our power goes out at least once a month. And so when they say, Oh, we're going to implement electric tractors. What? It's kind of still at the point where it's like, okay, we have bigger issues than this. And then on the other side of it, on the more conservative side of it, at the same time, you want families to be able to pass on their farm to their children and you want girls in rural areas to also be a part of agriculture and not have to be paid less and not have to be constantly be called a bitch by their co workers, or things like that. Like you need to be promoting those things. We also want for agriculture to thrive outside of big business. I don't think either side understands the issues and the things that need to be fixed for the longevity of small family farms.

Emma provides equal criticism of the Democratic and Republican parties for failing to address real needs in her rural, farming community. Her frustration with policy proposals from Democrats like “electric tractors” reflects a broader disconnect between high-tech climate initiatives and the basic infrastructural needs of rural communities. Her response underscores

how top-down environmental policy, often designed without rural consultation, can feel irrelevant or even absurd to those on the ground.

Yet Emma is equally critical of Republican shortcomings. While conservative politicians often champion family farms and rural tradition rhetorically, she challenges them to confront the real gendered and economic inequities within agriculture—from wage disparities to verbal harassment of women in the field. Her insistence that girls should be able to participate in agriculture “without being constantly called a bitch by their coworkers” spotlights the persistent gender discrimination in male-dominated rural industries, a reality frequently excluded from conservative narratives that idealize rural life. She also emphasizes the importance of supporting agriculture beyond “big business,” advocating for small, family-run farms and calling out the failure of both parties to protect their viability.

What makes Emma’s quote particularly compelling is that she moves beyond symbolic politics or culture war rhetoric to speak about material conditions in her community. Her perspective reflects a deeper truth: rural political frustration is not solely about ideology—it’s about being misunderstood, misrepresented, and ignored by systems that claim to serve them. Emma’s disillusionment reinforces what scholars like Jacobs and Shea (2024) and Cramer (2016) describe: a growing rural consciousness that views both left and right as failing to meet rural needs, not just in policy but in presence, attention, and empathy.

"What Matters Most": Liberal and Conservative Policy Priorities in Rural America

Conservative Identity: Self-Reliance, Fiscal Responsibility, and Moral Economy

When speaking to interviewees, I noticed a clear distinction in the policy priorities between liberals and conservatives. Liberals largely emphasized the importance of social issues centered around identity, such as abortion access, women's healthcare, and expanded rights for the LGBTQ+ community. On the other hand, conservatives strongly underscored their desire for fiscal responsibility and limited government in terms of spending and regulation. All interviewees were asked to describe the top issues that are most important to them when deciding to vote for, and all conservatives said that economic policy was their number one priority. For Dana, this focus was grounded in everyday economic pressures: "I am very fiscally conservative and believe we need to be mindful of where we spend our money. For me, economic issues and fiscal responsibility and good decisions with tax money and being able to afford groceries are key." Stella echoed these concerns, but also revealed how her political calculus is shaped not only by ideology, but by her role as a mother. In reflecting on national debt, she said:

There's a quote from Thomas Jefferson about how if a nation is in debt, they are on the path to facing big problems. Then you're a slave to debt. We are so far in our debt. It weakens our nation. I mean with the debt, I think about my son and I think about how that will affect the economic future for him.

Self-reliance emerged as one of the most consistent and deeply held values among conservative rural women in this study, shaping both their political identity and their broader worldview. This emphasis on personal responsibility, independence from government, and family-centered living was not only described as a lifestyle preference, but also as a kind of moral compass—a belief that being self-sufficient is not just practical,

but virtuous. As Stella explained, “I always had a core belief in the conservative principles, the small government, self-reliance, the taking responsibility for your own actions, family-centered... the conservative Republican platform is more cohesive to my values and my beliefs, and kind of always has been.” Her words underscore the way political ideology is not only about policies, but about aligning with a set of moral commitments—ones that frame reliance on government not just as inefficient, but as a potential erosion of personal integrity.

Emphasis on self-reliance echoes Cramer (2012) where she argues that rural people often frame their identity around hard work and self-reliance, contrasting these qualities with stereotypes of urbanites as lazy or dependent on government support. In many ways, this cultural boundary—between the hardworking rural American and the supposedly entitled urban dweller—helps shape not only policy preferences but also political resentment. The rural conservative women in this study weren’t merely describing what they value; they were articulating a worldview in which those values are perceived as underrecognized and even disrespected in broader political discourse. Self-reliance, then, becomes not just a personal ethic, but a political statement—an identity marker tied to place, morality, and power.

Another interviewee, Liz, also expressed a deep sense of economic frustration, feeling that despite high levels of government spending, their daily cost of living continues to rise with little relief:

Our government is spending money everywhere else, and our groceries are still too expensive. I'd like to be able to go to the store and pick up the tuna that's \$1.59

rather than the one that's \$1.39 and have to debate in my head, Oh, should I get this brand or this brand? Because one's 20 cents higher, that's what I do on every single item that I pick up. I have to weigh the difference in cost to taste and all that. I'd rather just walk in, pick up what I want, and not worry about it.

Liz's comment encapsulates a common rural sentiment of feeling economically squeezed and politically abandoned. Her frustration isn't just about the rising cost of groceries—it's about the disconnect between government action and everyday realities. The sense that "our government is spending money everywhere else" reflects a belief that federal priorities are out of sync with the lives of ordinary people. For many rural residents, this sentiment fed into the perception that the government has become too large, too inefficient, and too focused on global or elite concerns, while failing to address basic economic needs like affordable food.

This disconnect was particularly salient in the 2024 election, where inflation and the rising cost of living became dominant political concerns, especially in rural and working-class communities (AP News, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2024). Post-election polling showed that voters who were most concerned about their personal finances and the rising cost of living overwhelmingly supported Trump. He won decisively among those who felt their family's financial situation was "falling behind"—a group that grew from roughly 20% of the electorate in 2020 to about 30% in 2024. Trump also carried more than half of voters who were "very concerned" about essential expenses like food, housing, and healthcare. Economic concerns were particularly influential: voters who cited inflation as the most important factor in their decision were nearly twice as likely to vote for Trump over Harris, and approximately six in ten voters who prioritized the economy and jobs backed him as well. (Boak & Thomson-Deveaux, 2024).

For voters like Liz, the inability to make simple purchases without mental calculation became emblematic of a broader economic failure—and this frustration translated directly into political choices. Many rural voters supported Donald Trump not simply out of loyalty or identity, but because they believed he would “shake up” a bloated system and restore economic conditions where self-reliance was viable again. Fiscal conservatism and economic populism blended in a powerful way: the belief that government had grown too big and yet failed to do the one thing people needed most—make life affordable.

Interestingly, even when social issues were personally meaningful, they did not always take center stage in shaping political identity. Stephanie noted, “Small government, limited government, decreasing our debt, lower regulations, economy, those are probably the core ones that drive me. You know, I am pro-life, but that's not the one issue that I would die on a hill for.” Her remarks suggest that within rural conservatism, economic concerns often eclipse more divisive cultural issues—even among those who hold strong personal views. This nuance complicates common assumptions about the primacy of social conservatism in rural political life, and reinforces the idea that for many voters, policy decisions are ultimately rooted in a blend of personal responsibility and economic pragmatism.

Liberal Identity: Reproductive Justice, Healthcare Access, and Identity Politics

For liberal interviewees, their policy priorities were much different. Interviewees overwhelmingly stated that access to reproductive healthcare and women’s healthcare was their top factor when considering who they would vote for. Sue, who ran for state house as a

Democrat in her heavily rural district, outlined some of the main issues that she cared about and noticed when she was out campaigning in her community:

For myself, and especially women on the doors when I was campaigning, they were strongly for reproductive rights as their main issue. And people that I talk to are concerned because doctors aren't wanting to stay in Iowa. Young people are not wanting to stay in Iowa, because what if something happens in their pregnancy? So those are important issues for me.

Sue's concern that "young people are not wanting to stay in Iowa, because what if something happens in their pregnancy?" points to a sobering and often overlooked dimension of rural brain drain: the departure of liberal-leaning youth due not just to economic opportunity, but to fear over inadequate healthcare and restricted reproductive rights. This adds a new layer to the traditional narrative of rural brain drain, which often focuses on the loss of college-educated residents seeking jobs in urban centers. In this case, it is the erosion of bodily autonomy and access to essential care that drives young people—particularly women and those who support reproductive freedom—away from rural areas. The implication is that political and cultural shifts, such as increasingly restrictive abortion laws or the closure of OB-GYN services, are not only reshaping access to care but reshaping demographics. When people fear they won't be able to safely carry a pregnancy or access emergency care, they are far less likely to build a future in that place. For liberal rural youth, especially women, the message is clear: the state does not support or protect their rights or wellbeing. This not only deepens partisan divides but accelerates a geographic sorting where more progressive young people leave for cities or blue states—further isolating those who remain and reinforcing a conservative rural political identity.

Building on Sue’s insights, other liberal interviewees similarly emphasized that reproductive healthcare and broader health access were among the most urgent and influential issues shaping their political views. These concerns were not isolated, but deeply tied to their experiences of living in rural areas, where medical care is both physically and politically distant. Kim, for example, explained that her political priorities were grounded in the overlapping needs of women and marginalized groups:

A woman's rights, especially reproductive rights. And I guess right below that's probably anything related to healthcare, because I've seen how hard it is to access healthcare around here. And then I would say LGBTQ issues and expanding rights for that community.

Her comments are part of how the struggle for reproductive autonomy is often part of a broader political framework that includes access to basic healthcare and protections for LGBTQ+ individuals. Pam articulated the dual burden of legal restriction and geographic isolation that defines much of the rural healthcare experience, particularly for women. She explained that “abortion and women's health rights is a big one for me. I mean, on the abortion side, it was totally illegal in my state until recently, but because I don't live near a landmark city, the nearest Planned Parenthood or that kind of clinic, it's still like a three or four-hour drive away.” She went on to say that “non-reproductive health care” is also “very far away.” Pam’s experience underscores how logistical barriers can serve as a de facto denial of rights. In rural communities, the legality of abortion or availability of care on paper means little when the nearest facility is hours away. These physical distances reinforce the sense that rural women’s health needs are an afterthought in state and national policy decisions.

Emma offered a similar account of exclusion, this time pointing to the consequences of underfunded infrastructure. She shared, “Healthcare is pretty bad. Our closest hospital is 40 minutes away. So, if you get seriously injured, you’re getting life flighted. There’s also no women’s health care. We had a hospital, but it got shut down because of lack of funding.” Her description paints a picture of a healthcare system stretched to its breaking point—where not only are preventative and reproductive services unavailable, but emergency care itself is tenuous and potentially life-threatening. These stories make clear that for rural women, access to healthcare is not just about rights or choice, but about proximity, resources, and the basic capacity to receive timely care. In both Pam’s and Emma’s accounts, we see how rural health systems, hollowed out by disinvestment, contribute to a profound sense of abandonment.

Emma’s mention that there is “no women’s health care” in her area, and that a nearby hospital closed due to lack of funding, also underscores how underinvestment in rural health systems disproportionately affects women. For her and others in similar situations, the issue is not only the legality of reproductive services, but the complete absence of the infrastructure needed to access any consistent or preventive care. Jamie, who lives in southwest Iowa, also described how the closure of local facilities and the lack of medical professionals have made it nearly impossible for many women in her area to receive even the most basic reproductive care:

I care a lot about access to healthcare, especially for women. It's very hard to get into a good gynecologist. We're very short. I don't know of any hospitals around here that deliver babies. Most of the people I know that have been pregnant have to drive all the way to Omaha, which is about an hour and a half away. I don't think in southwest Iowa we even have a resident obstetrician. The Planned Parenthood close to me got run out. You used to be able to get a pap smear, or a breast exam, or anything else done there. And so now if you don't have a dependable car, you're out of gynecological care for

women. Also, since most people around here are on Medicaid, our gynecologists don't want to see them because the reimbursement never comes.

Emma and Jamie's statements about lack of access to women's health care in their communities are indicative of larger declining trends in rural obstetrics. According to a 2025 report conducted by the Chartis Center for Rural Health, between 2011 and 2023, 293 rural hospitals in the U.S. ceased providing obstetric (OB) services, representing a 24% decline in the nation's rural OB units. This widespread closure of maternity care has created what experts now call "OB deserts" across vast stretches of rural America, significantly increasing the risk in medical emergencies and undermining access to essential prenatal and newborn care. Eleven states lost ten or more OB units during this period, with Iowa experiencing the sharpest decline—losing OB care at 22 rural facilities—followed closely by Kansas (17). Iowa, Jamie's home state, lacks appropriate access to maternal health care in large swaths of the state.

Emma noted that her local hospital closed due to a lack of federal funding and the inability to operate at a financially viable level. The financial picture for rural hospitals overall is equally alarming. The Chartis Center report found that 46% of rural hospitals are currently operating at a loss, and 432 are considered "vulnerable to closure." The report also revealed a significant gap between Medicaid expansion and non-expansion states. Iowa, where Jamie resides, is considered to be a Medicaid-adverse state. In expansion states, rural hospitals had a modest median operating margin of 1.5%, with 43% operating in the red. In contrast, the ten non-expansion states—which account for 30% of all rural hospitals—had a median margin of -1.5%, with 53% of hospitals operating at a loss. This divide underscores the role of state policy in shaping rural healthcare viability, and it suggests that without significant intervention to

support Medicaid and reimburse providers, many rural communities will continue to lose critical services like OB care altogether.

In all of my interviews with liberal women, one theme was strikingly consistent: their political priorities were deeply shaped by their experiences and needs as women. Issues like access to reproductive healthcare, affordable women's health services, and maternal care were repeatedly named as the most important factors in determining how they voted. For these interviewees, political engagement was not abstract—it was rooted in the real and urgent stakes of their gendered experience living in under-resourced rural communities. This reflects a broader alignment with identity politics, where individuals prioritize policies that directly impact their own lives and the communities they belong to. Rather than seeing identity and policy as separate, these women placed their identity as women—particularly as women navigating a rural healthcare system—in the foreground of their political decision-making.

This emphasis on personal experience and specific policy issues stood in contrast to the themes that emerged in my conversations with conservative interviewees. While liberals focused on concrete areas of improvement, such as expanding healthcare access or protecting reproductive rights, conservative women tended to articulate broader concerns about government overreach, inefficiency, and misallocated spending. Their critiques were often framed in general terms—opposing "big government" or "wasteful spending"—rather than in terms of particular policies or systems to be reformed. This contrast reveals a fundamental difference in political orientation: while liberal rural women framed their political identities around tangible, issue-based needs, particularly those affecting them as women, conservative women expressed their

political values more through overarching principles like self-reliance, fiscal responsibility, and skepticism of state intervention.

Policy Implications

My interviews reveal a profound disconnect between rural communities and the political institutions meant to represent them. It is clear that across political lines, rural women voiced feelings of being misunderstood, excluded from national discourse, and misrepresented by both media and policymakers. These narratives point to several key areas where policy reform and institutional change are urgently needed—not only to address material conditions, but also to rebuild trust and inclusion in democratic life. On the policy level, there is still much work to be done to maximize the potential of rural communities. Expanding access to childcare and healthcare for women in rural communities is essential to addressing the gendered inequities that interviewees in this project repeatedly highlighted. Many rural women described the logistical and emotional burden of securing consistent childcare while simultaneously navigating limited healthcare options—particularly in rural areas, where OB-GYNs and childcare facilities are increasingly scarce. These experiences point to a deeper structural issue: rural infrastructure has not evolved to meet the changing needs of families, particularly women who work, parent, and care for others simultaneously.

Federal legislation exists that could directly address these challenges. The Expanding Child Care in Rural America Act proposes directing USDA rural development to prioritize childcare businesses and facilities, which would help fill critical gaps in service across rural counties. It would also make grants and technical assistance more accessible for small providers,

including home-based childcare, which is often the only option in rural places. Additionally, the Child Care for Every Community Act would cap the amount that families pay for child care and expand subsidies, ensuring that no family spends more than 7% of their income on care. These investments would not only relieve financial stress for rural families, but also allow more women to re-enter the workforce or pursue education—options that may provide difficult currently for rural women who lack childcare options.

On the healthcare front, the Save Rural Hospitals Act is crucial to keeping essential services, including reproductive and maternal care, within reach of rural women. Interviewees emphasized the emotional toll of having to choose between delayed care and costly travel. In many rural communities, pregnancy-related and maternal health services are practically nonexistent and may require women to travel upwards of 100 miles to access care.

In addition to passing legislation that supports advancements in rural communities, we also need to look at the ways in which rural communities are funded, or often excluded from funding through bureaucratic processes. Currently, federal rural investment is highly disjointed and driven by top-down decision-making that often overlooks on-the-ground realities. Programs are siloed across 16 different departments, each with their own application processes, reporting requirements, and timelines. For small rural governments with limited staff—often just one or two part-time officials—this fragmentation becomes a functional barrier to accessing support. The lead agency in charge of rural development currently is the USDA. But, it's important to note that while many of the people I spoke with lived in Midwestern communities with a strong agricultural presence—such as Wisconsin, Iowa, and Kansas—the reality is that only one in five

nonmetro counties nationwide is agriculture-focused, highlighting the need for rural development that reflects the full economic diversity of these regions.

Scholars at think tanks like the Brookings Institution and the Center for American Progress have proposed a solution to this dysfunction: a Rural Opportunity Administration. The Rural Opportunity Administration would not only consolidate resources, but also fundamentally shift how rural development is approached. It would allow for place-based investment models, giving rural communities more flexibility and input in shaping their futures. By embedding technical assistance within communities and investing in long-term partnerships—as was done through pilot programs like the Rural Partners Network—it could cultivate local capacity and trust in government institutions. Rather than imposing one-size-fits-all solutions from Washington, this model supports rural people in defining and implementing their own visions of economic and social well-being. Such a shift is essential to rebuilding political trust and empowering the kind of rural agency and resilience this project has shown to be deeply valued by residents themselves.

Beyond policy reforms, one of the most urgent calls from rural residents is simply to be seen and heard with dignity. Throughout my interviews, people expressed frustration not only with inadequate services or overlooked infrastructure, but with the persistent cultural narratives that depict rural communities as uneducated, backward, or inherently racist. These reductive stereotypes erase the complexity, resilience, and diversity of rural life and deepen feelings of political alienation. Meaningful change requires more than just federal investment; it also demands a cultural shift that values rural knowledge, respects rural experience, and includes rural voices in shaping the policies that affect their lives. Listening—genuinely and without

judgment—is a crucial first step toward rebuilding trust and bridging the growing urban-rural divide.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how gender and geographic identity converge to shape political behavior among rural women in the United States. Drawing from twelve in-depth interviews with women across the rural Midwest, the project sought to understand how rural consciousness, gender roles, and broader community dynamics inform political affiliation and policy preferences. The central research question—how gender shapes political identity among rural women—revealed a wide spectrum of political experience, shaped not only by partisanship but also by community values, family history, and educational opportunity.

Key findings emerged across several dimensions. First, rural identity itself carries significant political weight. Women across the political spectrum voiced strong place-based attachments and a shared frustration with how rural communities are misunderstood, misrepresented, or ignored by national media and political leadership. This sense of exclusion created a unifying thread in interviews, despite clear ideological divides.

Second, gender proved to be a critical yet variably interpreted force in shaping political identity. Liberal interviewees often cited their experiences of gender inequality, reproductive health access, and domestic expectations as central to their political outlook. Many described traditional gender roles as restrictive and emphasized the role of higher education, mobility, and women-led households in shaping more progressive beliefs. In contrast, conservative interviewees tended to view gender as a neutral or even empowering aspect of their identity.

They framed traditional roles not as limitations, but as valuable contributions rooted in self-reliance, family structure, and moral order.

Third, the data revealed a deep cultural and generational divide. Young women who left rural areas for college or work frequently returned with more liberal views, or chose not to return at all. Interviewees often described a "brain drain" effect, where those who remained in rural communities tended to be more conservative and less likely to challenge traditional norms. This trend suggests that outmigration not only changes the political composition of rural communities but also reinforces a feedback loop: as more progressive women leave, remaining communities become more homogenous and resistant to change.

Fourth, the research highlighted major policy concerns that drive rural women's voting behavior. Liberal women prioritized healthcare access—especially reproductive and maternal health—as well as LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality. Their political identity was often shaped by experiences of being underserved and unseen. Conservative women, meanwhile, overwhelmingly emphasized economic issues such as inflation, fiscal responsibility, and limited government. Even when social issues like abortion were personally significant, they did not drive voting behavior to the same extent as concerns over taxation and national debt.

Together, these findings challenge the dominant narrative that rural voters are politically uniform or easily categorized. Instead, this study reveals that political identity in rural America is deeply layered—inflected by class, education, gender, family structure, and lived experience. By focusing specifically on women, the research adds critical nuance to existing studies of rural

voting behavior, highlighting the divergent pathways through which gender informs political thought.

In light of these findings, several policy solutions are worth pursuing. Expanding access to childcare and reproductive healthcare in rural areas would not only meet critical needs but also help rebuild trust among populations that feel excluded from policymaking. Additionally, the proposed Rural Opportunity Administration could centralize and streamline development efforts across agencies, allowing communities themselves to drive investment and set priorities that reflect local realities.

Yet, policy alone is not enough. To bridge the urban-rural divide, cultural narratives must change. Rural Americans—especially women—must be heard and represented not just in elections, but in public discourse. Listening without judgment, amplifying rural voices, and resisting reductive portrayals are essential steps toward more inclusive political dialogue.

At the same time, this study acknowledges its limits. The interviews in this thesis represent a small, regionally specific group of rural women, and the sample skews more liberal due to difficulties in securing participation from conservative-identifying individuals. This reflects a broader challenge in qualitative research: political polarization and distrust can inhibit open dialogue, especially on sensitive topics like gender and identity. As a result, future studies should make a concerted effort to include more conservative voices to ensure a fuller understanding of the diversity within rural women's political perspectives. Additionally, there remains a pressing need for more qualitative work that centers women's lived experiences—research that goes beyond broad survey data to capture how people actually articulate their

values, frustrations, and hopes. In particular, studies that incorporate a wider range of identities—across race, age, sexuality, religion, and educational background—will be essential for building a more comprehensive picture of rural political life.

As national conversations about political identity grow increasingly polarized, understanding the complex and gendered motivations of rural Americans will be essential for policymakers, scholars, and organizers seeking to engage these communities with empathy and nuance. To understand the politics of place, we must first listen to the people shaped by it. And for rural women, those voices are varied, complex, and long overdue for deeper attention.

Appendices

Appendix A

Pseudonym	State of Residence	Political Affiliation
Dana	Missouri	Conservative
Emma	Ohio	Liberal
Jamie	Iowa	Liberal
Kim	Iowa	Liberal
Lisa	Kansas	Conservative
Mary	Kansas	Liberal
Nina	Kansas	Conservative
Pam	Missouri	Liberal
Stella	Wisconsin	Conservative
Stephanie	Wisconsin	Conservative
Sue	Iowa	Liberal
Vicky	Kansas	Liberal

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Opening

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me today. I am interested in hearing about your background living in a rural community and what types of political and community issues are most important to you. There are no right or wrong answers, and you are not required to answer any question that you do not want to. Please feel free to ask me to repeat or clarify a question if you are unsure of what I am asking. You may stop the interview at any point. I will not use your real name in my final paper.

Do you mind if I record our conversation to transcribe and review it later? All recordings and transcripts will be deleted at the completion of this project.

Political Affiliation and Beliefs

- Can you describe your connection to the community you live in? How long have you lived here? What sorts of industries exist there, if any?
- How would you describe your political affiliation? Has it changed over time? If so, what influenced those changes?
- What issues matter most to you when deciding who to vote for in elections?
- Do you feel your political preferences align with those of your family, neighbors, or community? Why or why not?
- How important is your community and its values in shaping your political views?

Policy Issues and Political Decision-Making

- How do economic concerns, such as job opportunities, wages, or farming policies, influence your political choices?
- In what ways, if any, does religion influence your political preferences?
- How do social issues, such as abortion, guns, or LGBTQ+ policies, influence your political preferences?
- Do you feel there are specific issues tied to rural life—such as agriculture, healthcare access, or education—that impact your voting choices?

Gender and Rural Identity

- Do you feel that being a woman in a rural community has shaped your identity? Why or why not?
- Do you ever feel pressure to align with certain political beliefs due to your role as a woman in your community?
- In what ways, if any, do you think gender influences how women in your community vote or affiliate politically?
- Have you noticed any differences in how men and women in your community view political issues or candidates?

National Politics and Rural Representation

- Do you feel national political conversations understand or reflect the realities of rural communities? Why or why not?
- Do you feel that political parties or candidates address issues that are particularly important to rural communities and rural women? Why or why not?

Closing

Your answers have been really helpful. Thank you so much for your time. Before we wrap things up, is there anything you would like to add or anything you think I should have asked you? Do you have any questions for me?

Also, do you know of anyone else who might be interested in speaking to me about their experiences? Thank you again!

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