

Political efficacy and the perceived influence of urban and rural residents

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Abstract

While political scientists have long studied citizens' political efficacy as an important indicator of attitudes toward government, less attention has been devoted to the efficacy of rural or urban residents, which is important given the intensifying rural–urban divide in American society. This study fills this gap by analyzing the 2020 American National Election Studies. Using ordered logistic regression, this study finds that (1) city residents tend to believe that small towns and rural areas have too much influence on government; (2) residents of small towns and rural areas demonstrate lower levels of external efficacy than city residents; and (3) people who believe that small towns and rural areas have too much influence tend to demonstrate high external and internal efficacies, a tendency that is clearer in cities than in other community types. These findings reflect mutual in-group bias and place-based resentment between rural and urban residents in American society.

KEYWORDS

ANES 2020, cities, external efficacy, in-group bias, internal efficacy, political efficacy, resentment, rural residents, rural–urban divide, United States, urban residents

Related Articles

Peterson, Holly L., Mark K. McBeth, and Michael D. Jones. 2020. "Policy Process Theory for Rural Studies: Navigating Context and Generalization in Rural Policy." *Politics & Policy* 48(4): 576–617. <https://doi.org/10.1111/polp.12366>.

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Smith-Walter, Aaron, Holly L. Peterson, Michael D. Jones, and Ashley Nicole Reynolds Marshall. 2016. "Gun Stories: How Evidence Shapes Firearm Policy in the United States." *Politics & Policy* 44(6): 1053–88. <https://doi-org.libproxy.usouthal.edu/10.1111/polp.12187>.



The divide between urban and rural voters in the United States can be traced back to the late 19th century, when rapid industrialization started in coastal cities (Rodden, 2019). However, during the last few decades, national elections have become noticeably characterized by rural residents' support for Republican candidates and urban residents' support for Democratic candidates (de Wit et al., 2021; Hopkins, 2017; Lin & Lunz Trujillo, 2023; Mettler & Brown, 2022). This has been particularly widely discussed since the 2016 presidential election, which surprised the world with its narrow margin of victory and the strong electoral impact of rural areas (Johnston et al., 2020; Love & Loh, 2020). Scholars have pointed out that this divide and the widening chasm between rural and urban residents could be detrimental to American democracy. This is largely because this divide is not based on a consistent set of values but on an “us versus them” mentality and animosity toward the other group (Jacobs & Munis, 2023; Kaufman, 2021; Munis, 2022; Wuthnow, 2018). In many ways, politics has become a “team sport” rather than a clash of competing ideas or values.

Rural residents tend to feel that they receive little respect and have little influence on government. According to Cramer (2016), rural Wisconsinites believe that government and politicians neglect their problems and serve urbanites who look down on them as backward and unsophisticated. Conversely, urban residents think that vast rural areas have been consolidated to “punch above their weight” in national elections to exert more influence on national politics than they deserve (Brown et al., 2021, p. 367). Similarly, suburbanites may feel ignored by the government's spending on urban infrastructure rather than on serving suburban commuters (Munis, 2022). This “place-based resentment” appears to have a significant effect on many political attitudes, including an individual's vote choice (Jacobs & Munis, 2023).

Regarding citizens' perceived influence on government, political scientists have long measured political efficacy as an important marker of citizens' attitudes toward government and the political system (Abramson & Aldrich, 1982; Balch, 1974; Craig et al., 1990; Craig & Maggiotto, 1982). Political efficacy is the feeling that one can, or could potentially, understand and influence the political process. This is important because the stability and durability of a democratic system rely on adequate levels of diffuse and specific support among its citizens (Easton, 1965). Political efficacy can shape both types of support and is thought to be a key indicator of the overall health of democratic systems (Craig et al., 1990). In a democracy, an individual's assessment of whether citizens have any influence in politics “becomes in effect an assessment of whether or not a definitive feature of the regime is intact” (Madsen, 1978, p. 868; see also Watson et al., 2023). Therefore, political efficacy has played a key role in democratic theory and political research (Almond & Verba, 1963; Macpherson, 1977; Pateman, 1970).

Despite the sizable body of literature, existing studies on political efficacy have focused heavily on individual-level factors and paid less attention to broader community contexts, such as urban and rural settings. Moreover, the fast-growing body of research on the rural–urban divide has not yet examined political efficacy as a measure of people's different perceptions of politics. This study fills this gap by focusing on how people's levels of political efficacy differ based on their community type (e.g., city, suburb, small town, or rural area) and by comparing rural and urban residents' perceptions of their relative influence on government. The 2020 American National Election Studies (ANES) enabled this study by providing nationwide survey data from over 8,000 American respondents. The data include the respondents' community types as well as measures of their external and internal political efficacy. Furthermore, the survey asked the respondents for their perceptions of the political influence of small towns and rural areas compared to that of cities and suburbs. The results of this analysis demonstrate how group mentality is associated with political efficacy and enhance our understanding of the intensifying divide between rural and urban areas.



POLITICAL EFFICACY AND THE RURAL–URBAN DIVIDE IN THE AMERICAN SOCIETY

Political efficacy was initially defined as individuals' positive feelings owing to the perceived possibility of being part of political change by influencing the political process (Campbell et al., 1954; Craig & Maggionto, 1982). Balch (1974) diverged from the earliest conceptions of political efficacy by identifying the existence of two different aspects of political efficacy: one linked to people's diffuse support for the political system, which is similar to political trust, and the other related to people's perceived ability to cope with their surroundings (Balch, 1974). Although the measurement of these efficacies has evolved over time, it is now well established that one's political efficacy is made up of the following two types of efficacies: “external efficacy,” which refers to one's perception of government responsiveness, and “internal efficacy,” which refers to one's personal belief that one is knowledgeable enough to participate in politics (Acock et al., 1985; Craig & Maggionto, 1982; Niemi et al., 1991, p. 1407).

Political efficacy has been studied in association with individuals' political behavior. Some scholars have attributed the decline in voter turnout in America since the 1960s to a decline in political efficacy (e.g., Balch, 1974; Lipset & Schneider, 1983). For example, Abramson and Aldrich (1982) suggested that people's declining belief in government responsiveness, together with a weakening of party identification, could explain the lowered turnout between 1960 and 1980. Others have focused on how individuals' political efficacy is associated with their political trust, political knowledge, and exposure to political information (Craig et al., 1990; Haenschen et al., 2022; Jung et al., 2011). For example, Haenschen and others (2022) discovered that individuals' knowledge about a specific political event could make them confident in their overall political knowledge, giving them the sense that their government will respond to them.

Political efficacy has also been found to be associated with socioeconomic factors. Form and Huber (1971) found that both racial status (i.e., racial majority or minority) and household income positively impacted people's political efficacy; in particular, low-income African American groups demonstrated low political efficacy because they tended to believe that government was very much influenced by interest groups funded by the rich. Educational attainment has also been found to have a positive effect on political efficacy (see Craig et al., 1990). In addition, individuals' political knowledge and interests, strength of partisanship, media exposure, and Internet access have been found to positively influence their political efficacy (see Jung et al., 2011; Kenski & Stroud, 2006).

Beyond these individual-level factors, political efficacy interacts with community or social contexts, meaning that political efficacy is not static and that people in the same group may share similar levels. Davis and Hitt (2017) found that election results continuously affect people's political efficacy; specifically, people who voted for a winner tended to have greater perceived efficacy, especially immediately after an election, while voting for a loser had a negative association with efficacy, which rebounded as the next election cycle drew close. Anderson (2010) studied people's political efficacy in the context of community experience. She tested the main assumption of social capital studies—that is, that positive social interactions can encourage civic engagement and participation, enabling community members to cope with problems (see Lee, 2022; Lee et al., 2022; Putnam, 2000)—and found that a sense of community shared among community members had a positive effect on political efficacy (Anderson, 2010). Changing political cultures can also account for changing political efficacy. Chamberlain (2013) showed that before 1980, individuals who were embedded in individualistic, moralistic, and traditionalistic political cultures demonstrated different levels of external political efficacy; however, the differences among political cultures have disappeared since 1980, which means that political culture no longer has a substantive effect on external political efficacy. Norris (2015) focused on inequality in the United States and found that states where



income inequality was high tended to have low external efficacy, meaning that those who experience greater income inequality may have lower political efficacy.

A crucial social context that has been understudied in association with political efficacy is urban versus rural settings. Some scholars have explored this topic outside of American society. For example, Luukkonen and others (2022) compared European societies and found that external political efficacy is weaker in rural settings and in regions with low gross domestic products and declining populations. However, much is still unknown about this relationship especially in American political and historical contexts. American society has long experienced a division between citizens in rural and urban areas (Rodden, 2019). A salient point in history was the Bryan–McKinley campaign of 1896, in which McKinley was popular in rural, agricultural areas, and Bryan was favored in dense urban areas (Diamond, 1941). However, it was not until the mid-20th century that a sizable urban population emerged in cities across the country, and class differences were recognized (Gimpel et al., 2020). During this time, rural workers developed a different self-image (i.e., independent entrepreneurs or property owners) from urban laborers, who needed government protection and regulations (Gimpel & Karnes, 2006). This division grew slowly in the 1990s, when the number of rural residents who supported the Republican Party increased significantly (Brown et al., 2021; Mettler & Brown, 2022). Gimpel and Karnes (2006) analyzed the 2004 ANES and found that the rural–urban divide in national elections became clearer in the early 2000s, granting an advantage to Republicans in rural areas and to Democrats in populous cities. Interestingly, suburban voters were generally fluid, although the majority identified as Republican (Gimpel & Karnes, 2006).

Some scholars have investigated the causes of this rural–urban divide in terms of various factors, such as geographical locations, distance, culture, and population density (see Gimpel et al., 2020). For example, Rodden (2019) suggested that gerrymandering practices may have played an important role in the Republican advantage in rural areas. Brown and others (2021) noted several drivers of the urban–rural divide: higher economic growth in urban areas relative to economic growth in rural areas, increased diversity in urban areas, the influence of different types of organizations in rural versus urban areas (e.g., churches or unions), and higher levels of provincialism in rural areas. They found that all of these, combined with the willingness of politicians to cater to the related resentments, contributed to a growing sense of “us versus them” between rural and urban residents (Brown et al., 2021).

This is supported by research on the social and psychological aspects of group isolation and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Wong, 2019). Such studies tend to go beyond the geographic or cultural differences between rural and urban areas and focus on residents' identities and emotions attached to their areas of residence. For example, Mason (2018) found that as tribalism among in-groups grows, it inflates negative stereotypes associated with out-groups, increasing animosity toward them. As in-groups' identities strengthen, they are also more likely to believe that out-groups pose a threat to that identity and, in some cases, seek to eliminate that threat at all costs. For rural areas, Cramer (2016) labeled this phenomenon “rural resentment.” Residents of rural areas perceive that they are treated unfairly by out-groups, which leads them to resent urbanites and government. Cramer tied this resentment to cultural elements, distributional politics, and representational politics. Building on Cramer's study, Munis (2022) argued that this phenomenon involves not just rural resentment but a “place-based hostility” toward out-group members. Brown and others (2021) also pointed out that such a widening chasm between rural and urban residents is based not on a consistent set of values but on an “us versus them” mentality and animosity toward the other group. Rural residents tend to feel that cities dominate and use the system for their own benefit, while urban residents feel that the representation system offers unfair advantages to rural places, giving them a boost in national elections (Brown et al., 2021; Kaufman, 2021; Wuthnow, 2018).

The key to this conversation is place-based resentment in American society, whether from urban or rural residents, which provides a theoretical basis for this study. While statistical



relationships between geography and political efficacy have been examined in other societies (e.g., del Horno et al., 2023; Luukkonen et al., 2022), such studies assume that rural residents' weak external efficacy is driven mostly by their feelings of being left behind and becoming losers in the globalized and knowledge-based economies. However, this study assumes that such a decrease in political efficacy may be driven, at least in part, by the feeling that government is less responsive to an individual's in-group than to the perceived outgroup. Rural residents resent urban residents because they perceive that government caters to the interests of urban residents at their expense using networks and resources; conversely, urban residents resent rural residents because they believe that rural residents have a disproportionate impact on electoral results, which diminishes the impact that urban residents have on government relative to their numbers. Based on this assumption, we examine first how rural and urban residents evaluate the other group's influence on government, and second, how such evaluations are associated with their two types of political efficacy: external and internal. In the following, these relationships will be examined using statistical models.

DATA, VARIABLES, AND METHODS

Data

This study used the most recent survey results from the 2020 ANES public dataset for the period of August 18, 2020, through January 3, 2021. The survey was conducted using platforms with web-only; web-plus-phone; and video, web, and phone functionalities. A total of 10,225 people responded to the survey request, and the response rates were 41.2% for the web-only mode, 44.2% for the web-plus-phone mode, and 31% for the mode using video, web, and phone (ANES, 2021). The dataset and documentation are publicly accessible via the ANES homepage (<https://electionstudies.org>).

Variables

The main output variables were the respondents' external and internal efficacies. For external efficacy, the ANES asked participants to respond to two statements: "Public officials don't care much what people like me think" and "People like me don't have any say about what the government does." The respondents were asked to choose among five suggested answers: (1) agree strongly, (2) agree somewhat, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) disagree somewhat, and (5) disagree strongly. The answers to the questions were averaged to capture both aspects of external efficacy. The approach of combining ANES efficacy questions to create a single variable has been adopted in previous studies (e.g., Dyck & Lascher, 2009; Rudolph et al., 2000). Moreover, the internal consistency of these two questions was acceptable (Cronbach's $\alpha > .7$). For internal efficacy, two questions were asked: "How often do politics and government seem so complicated that you can't really understand what's going on?" and "How well do you understand the important political issues facing our country?" The responses to the two questions were averaged for the same reasons as those for external efficacy.

The ANES also asked, "Compared to people living in cities, do people living in small towns and rural areas have too much influence, too little influence, or about the right amount of influence on government?" Seven answers were suggested: "too little" was coded as 1, "somewhat too little" as 2, "a little too little" as 3, "about the right amount" as 4, "a little too much" as 5, "somewhat too much" as 6, and "much too much" as 7. In the following analysis, this question was used as both an output variable and an explanatory variable. As another explanatory



variable regarding the rural–urban context, the ANES asked respondents if they “currently lived in a rural or urban area.” Four community types were suggested: “city” was coded as 1, “suburb” as 2, “small town” as 3, and “rural area” as 4.

The first control variable used in this study was the survey respondents' age. The responses were coded in terms of age, with the youngest being 18 due to the voting age restriction. The next control variable was race. Four different racial groups were included in this study, and each was coded as a binary variable. Household income was also included. The responses were coded from 1 to 22, with “under \$9999” coded as 1. The total income increased by \$5,000 with each number; for example, “\$10,000–\$14,999” was coded as 2, and “\$15,000–\$19,999” was coded as 3. Educational attainment was coded on a scale, with “less than high school” as 1, “high school graduate” as 2, “some college” as 3, “occupational associate” as 4, “academic associate” as 5, “bachelor's degree” as 6, “master's degree” as 7, and “professional school degree” as 8. The respondents' biological sex was also included: “male” was coded as 1, and “female” as 2. The ANES further asked respondents about their party identification. For this question, “strong Democrat” was coded as 1, “not very strong Democrat” as 2, “independent Democrat” as 3, “independent” as 4, “independent Republican” as 5, “not very strong Republican” as 6, and “strong Republican” as 7. The next variable asked survey respondents whether they were religious, which has been found to be closely associated with other American political issues (e.g., Cannedy & Lee, 2022; Reijven et al., 2020). This variable was coded with 0 representing “not religious” and 1 representing “religious.” The final variable used in this study was the state in which the respondent grew up. This was coded from 1 to 59, beginning with each state in alphabetical order, followed by Puerto Rico, other U.S. territories (Guam, Samoa, and the Virgin Islands), and another country. This variable was only included as a fixed effect; therefore, the results are not reported in the following tables. Table 1 describes all the variables, and Table 2 provides a matrix based on Spearman's correlation, which is more suitable than Pearson's correlation for monotonic relationships among ordinal variables. The variance inflation factor was calculated for multicollinearity, and all regression models had results less than 2, which is acceptable in most social science studies (cf. Rabe-Hesketh & Everitt, 2003).

ANALYSIS

As the dependent variables were ordinal, ordered logistic regression was used. An important assumption of ordered logistic regression is that the effect of predictors is the same across all categories of the ordinal dependent variable, also known as the proportional odds assumption (Liu & Koirala, 2012). The Brant test method was used to test this assumption, and the results confirmed that the proportional odds assumption holds for all three regression models. Moreover, effect plots were created to illustrate the proportional odds ratios (OR). Finally, statistical analyses were carried out using the R 4.2.3, MASS (v7.3.60, Ripley et al., 2013), and “effect” (v4.2.2, Fox et al., 2016) packages. See Table 1 for the descriptive statistics and Table 2 for the correlation matrix of variables.

RESULTS

Before structuring a regression model, we explored the ANES survey results regarding how people perceived the influence of small towns and rural areas on government. Figure 1 illustrates the results. Overall, the “about the right amount” category was the most popular choice; however, a higher percentage of city (44.6%) and suburban residents (43.9%) chose this category compared to small-town (39.1%) and rural residents (31.6%). The majority of small-town (51.9%) and rural residents (61.2%) chose one of the three “too little influence” categories,

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics of variables.

	<i>N</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. deviation
<i>Dependent variable</i>					
External efficacy	7412	1	5	2.42	1.05
Internal efficacy	7420	1	5	3.35	.83
<i>Independent variable</i>					
Influence of small towns and rural areas	7311	1	7	3.36	1.62
Community type	7383				
City	2190	0	1		
Suburb	2236	0	1		
Small town	1842	0	1		
Rural areas	1115	0	1		
<i>Control variable</i>					
Age	7932	18	80	51.59	17.21
Race	8178				
White	5963	0	1		
Black	726	0	1		
Hispanic	762	0	1		
Other	727	0	1		
Household income	7664	1	22	11.75	6.75
Education	8149	1	8	4.53	2.04
Sex (male = 1, female = 2)	8213	1	2	1.54	.498
Democratic-Republican scale	8245	1	7	3.89	2.25

while a lower percentage of city (34.6%) and suburban (39.3%) residents did. A higher percentage of city (20.8%) and suburban (16.9%) residents than small-town (9.1%) and rural (7.2%) residents answered that small-town and rural residents have “too much influence” on government. Overall, the division between city and rural areas is clear. Also note that the percentages for the responses of suburban and city residents were close and similar, as were those of small-town and rural residents.

Next, a regression model was created for the perceived influence of small towns and rural areas on government. This was done to identify how residents of cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural areas perceive one another's influence on government. The results are shown in [Table 3](#). In the table, city is used as a reference category, and the coefficients have been unstandardized and represent the change in log odds in the output variable per unit change in the explanatory variables. We also exponentiated the coefficients for the ORs so that they are easier to interpret.

The results showed that suburban residents ($b = -.166$, $OR = .847$, $p < .01$) demonstrated 15.3% lower odds ($=100 \times [1 - .847]$) than city residents of believing that small towns and rural areas exert too much influence on government, with all other variables held constant. Residents of small towns ($b = -.539$, $OR = .583$, $p < .01$) had 41.7% lower odds than city residents of holding such a belief, whereas rural areas ($b = -.738$, $OR = .478$, $p < .01$) exhibited 52.2% lower odds than city residents of holding such a belief. These results indicate that city residents are more likely to believe that small towns and rural areas have too much influence on government than do the residents of suburbs, small towns, or rural areas.



TABLE 2 Correlation matrix of variables.

	External efficacy	Internal efficacy	Rural residents	Influence of small towns and rural areas	Age	White	Black	Hispanic	Other	Household income	Education	Sex	D-R scale	Religion
External efficacy	1													
Internal efficacy	.17**	1												
Rural residents	-.11**	-.05**	1											
Influence of small towns and rural areas	.19**	.12**	-.21**	1										
Age	.02	.12**	.10**	-.09**	1									
White	.00	.06**	.18**	-.03**	.18**	1								
Black	.01	.00	-.12**	.02	-.05**	-.50**	1							
Hispanic	-.01	-.07**	-.12**	.01	-.15**	-.51**	-.10**	1						
Other	-.01	-.02	-.06**	.03*	-.08**	-.50**	-.10**	-.10**	1					
Household income	.11**	.18**	-.05**	.10**	-.02*	.14**	-.16**	-.06**	.01	1				
Education	.18**	.25**	-.14**	.17**	-.01	.08**	-.08**	-.10**	.05**	.38**	1			
Sex	.02	-.14**	.01	-.04**	-.01	-.02*	.07**	-.01	-.02	-.10**	.00	1		
D-R scale	-.19**	-.05**	.22**	-.32**	.07**	.23**	-.24**	-.08**	-.05**	.02	-.11**	-.10**	1	
Religion	-.01	-.03*	.09**	-.21**	.20**	.00	.07**	-.02	-.05**	-.02	-.06**	.07**	.21**	1

Note: Asterisks indicate statistical significance, * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; coefficients are Spearman's correlation.

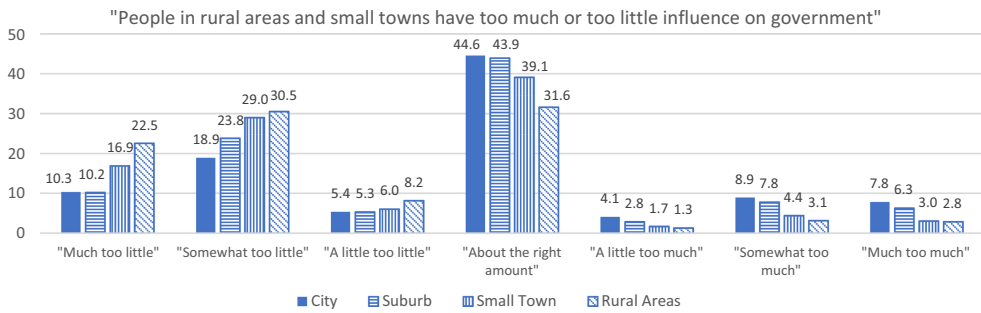


FIGURE 1 Perceived influence of small towns and rural areas on the government. All numbers are percentage. The ANES code for the question is V202279x.

To better understand the previous results, Figure 2 illustrates the probabilities of the dependent variable (referred to as “rural influence” in the plot) predicted by community type. This main effect plot stacks the probabilities of all categories. The plot shows that while the middle category (i.e., “about the right amount”) of rural influence has the highest probabilities in all four community types, the probabilities of the two bottom categories (i.e., “somewhat too little” and “much too little”) increase gradually as we move from city to suburb, to small town, and to rural area. Compared to the noticeable change in the bottom categories, changes in the top categories (i.e., “much too much,” “somewhat too much,” and “a little too much”) were very small, indicating that the proportion of people who chose “too little influence” varied more significantly across community type than the proportion of people who answered “too much influence.”

Among the control variables, older respondents ($b = -.005$, $OR = .995$, and $p < .01$) tended to believe that small towns and rural areas have too little influence on government. In contrast, wealthy respondents ($b = .011$, $OR = 1.011$, and $p < .01$) and respondents with higher education ($b = .082$, $OR = 1.085$, and $p < .01$) tended to believe that small towns and rural areas have too much influence on government. Female respondents ($b = -.162$, $OR = .850$, and $p < .01$) and Republicans ($b = -.245$, $OR = .783$, and $p < .01$), compared to male and Democrat respondents, respectively, exhibited a higher tendency to believe that small towns and rural areas have too little influence on government. This tendency was also shared by religious respondents ($b = -.583$, $OR = .558$, and $p < .01$). Finally, compared to the White majority group, Black respondents ($b = -.435$, $OR = .647$, and $p < .01$) demonstrated lower odds of believing that small towns and rural areas have too much influence on government. Other racial groups did not exhibit any statistically significant differences.

In the next step, the respondents' external and internal efficacies were regressed on community type and the perceived influence of small towns and rural areas. Two models were structured for external and internal efficacies. The lowest category of influence of small towns and rural areas (“much too little”) was used as the reference category. Table 4 presents the results. For external efficacy, the residents of small towns ($b = -.161$, $OR = .851$, and $p < .01$) and rural areas ($b = -.181$, $OR = .076$, and $p < .01$) demonstrated significantly lower odds than residents of cities of having high levels of external efficacy. However, the coefficient for suburbs was not statistically significant, meaning that suburbs and cities are statistically indistinguishable in terms of external efficacy. In addition, all the categories of influence of small towns and rural areas showed positive coefficients. People who chose “somewhat too little” ($b = .581$, $OR = 1.788$, and $p < .01$) had 1.788 times higher odds than people who chose “much too little” of having higher levels of external efficacy. People who chose “a little too little” ($b = .507$, $OR = 1.660$, and $p < .01$), “about the right amount” ($b = .881$, $OR = 2.413$, $p < .01$), “a little too much” ($b = .823$, $OR = 2.277$, and $p < .01$), “somewhat too much” ($b = .849$, $OR = 2.337$, and $p < .01$), and “much too much” ($b = .885$,

TABLE 3 Ordered logistic regression of perceived influence of small towns and rural areas on community types.

	Influence of small towns and rural areas	
	<i>b</i>	Exp[<i>b</i>]
Community type (reference: city)		
Suburb	-.166** (.061)	.847
Small town	-.539** (.065)	.583
Rural area	-.738** (.077)	.478
Age	-.005** (.001)	.995
Household income	.011** (.004)	1.011
Education	.082** (.013)	1.085
Sex (male = 1/female = 2)	-.162** (.047)	.850
Party ID (D-R scale)	-.245** (.012)	.783
Religiousness	-.583** (.059)	.558
Race (Reference: White)		
Black	-.435** (.093)	.647
Hispanic	-.138 (.090)	.871
Other	-.154 (.087)	.856
State fixed effects	Not reported	Not reported
Intercepts		
1 2	-3.842** (.251)	.021
2 3	-2.335** (.248)	.097
3 4	-2.063** (.248)	.127
4 5	.214 (.247)	1.239
5 6	.475* (.247)	1.608
6 7	1.412** (.249)	4.104
Observations	6532	
Residual deviance	19,456.85	
AIC	19,598.85	
Pseudo R^2 (Nagelkerke)	.182	
Pseudo R^2 (Cox–Snell)	.175	

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors; the exponentiated coefficients are odds ratios (ORs); intercepts indicate the ordered answers (1 = “Too little,” 2 = “Somewhat too little,” 3 = “A little too little,” 4 = “About the right amount,” 5 = “A little too much,” 6 = “Somewhat too much,” and 7 = “Much too much”); asterisks indicate statistical significance.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

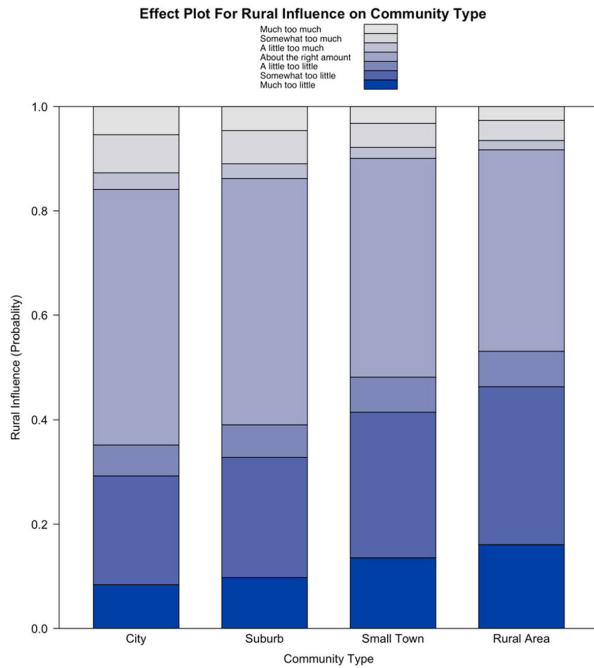


FIGURE 2 Predicted probabilities of perceived influence of small towns and rural areas regressed on community type.

OR=2.423, and $p < .01$) also showed higher odds than people who chose “much too little.” This means that those who believed that small towns and rural areas have too much influence tended to exhibit higher levels of external efficacy than those who did not.

These results are visualized in Figure 3. Graph A demonstrates that cities and suburbs exhibit higher probabilities in the “very high” and “high” categories than small towns and rural areas, while small towns and rural areas exhibit higher probabilities in the “very low” and “low” categories than cities and suburbs. The graph also shows that the difference between suburbs and rural areas is greater than the difference between cities and suburbs or between small towns and rural areas. Graph B shows that those who believe that small towns and rural areas have too much influence tend to exhibit higher probabilities in the “high” and “very high” categories of external efficacy. Graph E considers both community type and rural influence and demonstrates how they interact to predict external efficacy. The graph shows that the tendency shown in Graph B is clearer in cities than in the other three community types. This means that city residents who felt that small towns and rural areas have too much influence were more likely to have higher levels of external efficacy.

For internal efficacy, residents of small towns ($b = -.145$, OR = .865, $p < .05$) had lower odds of having high levels of internal efficacy than city residents. However, suburbs as well as rural areas did not exhibit statistically significant differences from cities. This indicates that the relationship between internal efficacy and community type is not as clear as the relationship between external efficacy and community type. In addition, the perceived influence of small towns and rural areas revealed two patterns. Those who chose “somewhat too little” ($b = -.364$, OR = .695, $p < .01$), “a little too little” ($b = -.514$, OR = .598, $p < .01$), and “about the right amount” ($b = -.223$, OR = .800, $p < .01$) showed lower odds of having higher levels of internal efficacy than people who chose “much too little,” which is the reference category. However, those who chose “somewhat too much” ($b = .230$, OR = 1.259, $p < .05$) and “much too much” ($b = .855$, OR = 2.351, $p < .01$) showed higher odds of having higher levels of internal efficacy

TABLE 4 Ordered logistic regression of political efficacy on perceived influence of small towns and rural areas and community types.

	External efficacy		Internal efficacy	
	<i>b</i>	Exp[<i>b</i>]	<i>b</i>	Exp[<i>b</i>]
Community type (reference: city)				
Suburb	.003 (.060)	1.003	.093 (.062)	1.097
Small town	-.161** (.064)	.851	-.145* (.066)	.865
Rural area	-.181** (.076)	.834	-.056 (.078)	.946
Influence of small towns and rural areas (reference: "much too little")				
"Much too little"	.581** (.080)	1.788	-.364** (.081)	.695
"Somewhat too little"	.507** (.113)	1.660	-.514** (.117)	.598
"A little too little"	.881** (.076)	2.413	-.223** (.077)	.800
"A little too much"	.823** (.157)	2.277	.159 (.158)	1.172
"Somewhat too much"	.849** (.114)	2.337	.230* (.117)	1.259
"Much too much"	.885** (.112)	2.423	.855** (.127)	2.351
Age	.002 (.001)	1.002	.015** (.001)	1.015
Household income	.016** (.004)	1.016	.027** (.004)	1.027
Education	.104** (.013)	1.110	.170** (.013)	1.185
Sex (male = 1/female = 2)	.031 (.046)	1.031	-.442** (.048)	.643
Party ID (D-R scale)	-.119** (.012)	.888	-.015 (.012)	.985
Religiousness	.193** (.058)	1.213	-.065 (.060)	.937
Race (reference: White)				
Black	-.147 (.090)	.863	.182 (.093)	1.200
Hispanic	-.053 (.090)	.948	-.192* (.092)	.825
Other	-.181* (.084)	.834	-.175 (.089)	.839
State fixed effects	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported	Not reported
Intercepts				
1 2	-.129 (.251)	.879	-4.123** (.288)	.016

TABLE 4 (Continued)

	External efficacy		Internal efficacy	
	<i>b</i>	Exp[<i>b</i>]	<i>b</i>	Exp[<i>b</i>]
2 3	1.767** (.252)	5.853	-1.633** (.258)	.195
3 4	3.020** (.253)	20.491	.614* (.257)	1.848
4 5	4.792** (.258)	120.542	2.897** (.259)	18.120
Observations	6530		6531	
Residual deviance	18,323.35		15,424.59	
Akaike information criterion	18,473.35		15,574.59	
Pseudo R^2 (Nagelkerke)	.101		.140	
Pseudo R^2 (Cox-Snell)	.095		.128	

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors; the exponentiated coefficients are odds ratios (OR); intercepts indicate ordered efficacy levels (1 = Very Low, 2 = Low, 3 = Medium, 4 = High, and 5 = Very High); asterisks indicate statistical significance.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

than those who chose “much too little.” These findings are visualized in Figure 3. Graph C illustrates that small towns have higher probabilities than suburbs in the “low” and “very low” categories, but no visible distinction was found between city/suburb or small town/rural area. Graph D shows that people who believe that small towns and rural areas have too much influence tend to exhibit higher probabilities of “high” and “very high” internal efficacy; however, those who believe that rural influence is “much too little” also demonstrate high levels of internal efficacy. This may mean that a strong belief (i.e., either “too much” or “too little”) is associated with a higher level of internal efficacy. Similar patterns were found across community types, as Graph F shows an interaction of internal efficacy and rural influence.

Among the control variables, age ($b = .015$, $OR = 1.015$, and $p < .01$) was only associated with internal efficacy (not with external efficacy), with statistical significance. Household income predicted greater odds of high external efficacy ($b = .016$, $OR = 1.016$, and $p < .01$) and high internal efficacy ($b = .027$, $OR = 1.027$, and $p < .01$). Education also had positive and significant coefficients in terms of external efficacy ($b = .104$, $OR = 1.110$, $p < .01$) and internal efficacy ($b = .170$, $OR = 1.185$, and $p < .01$). Sex was only significantly associated with internal efficacy; female respondents had lower odds of having higher internal efficacy ($b = -.442$, $OR = .643$, and $p < .01$) than that of male respondents. Party identification was significantly associated only with external efficacy, with Republicans tending to have lower external efficacy ($b = -.119$, $OR = .888$, and $p < .01$). Religious people tended to have higher external efficacy ($b = .193$, $OR = 1.213$, and $p < .01$). Racial groups showed interesting results that invite further study. Compared to the White category, the Hispanic category had lower odds of having high levels of internal efficacy ($b = -.192$, $OR = .825$, and $p < .05$). Other minority groups had lower external efficacy ($b = -.181$, $OR = .834$, and $p < .05$) than the White category.

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to provide a better understanding of how residents of urban and rural areas in American society perceive other groups' influence on government and how these perceptions are related to residents' external and internal efficacies. The first interesting finding is that while the urban-rural divide was observed in this study, we did not find a clear fault

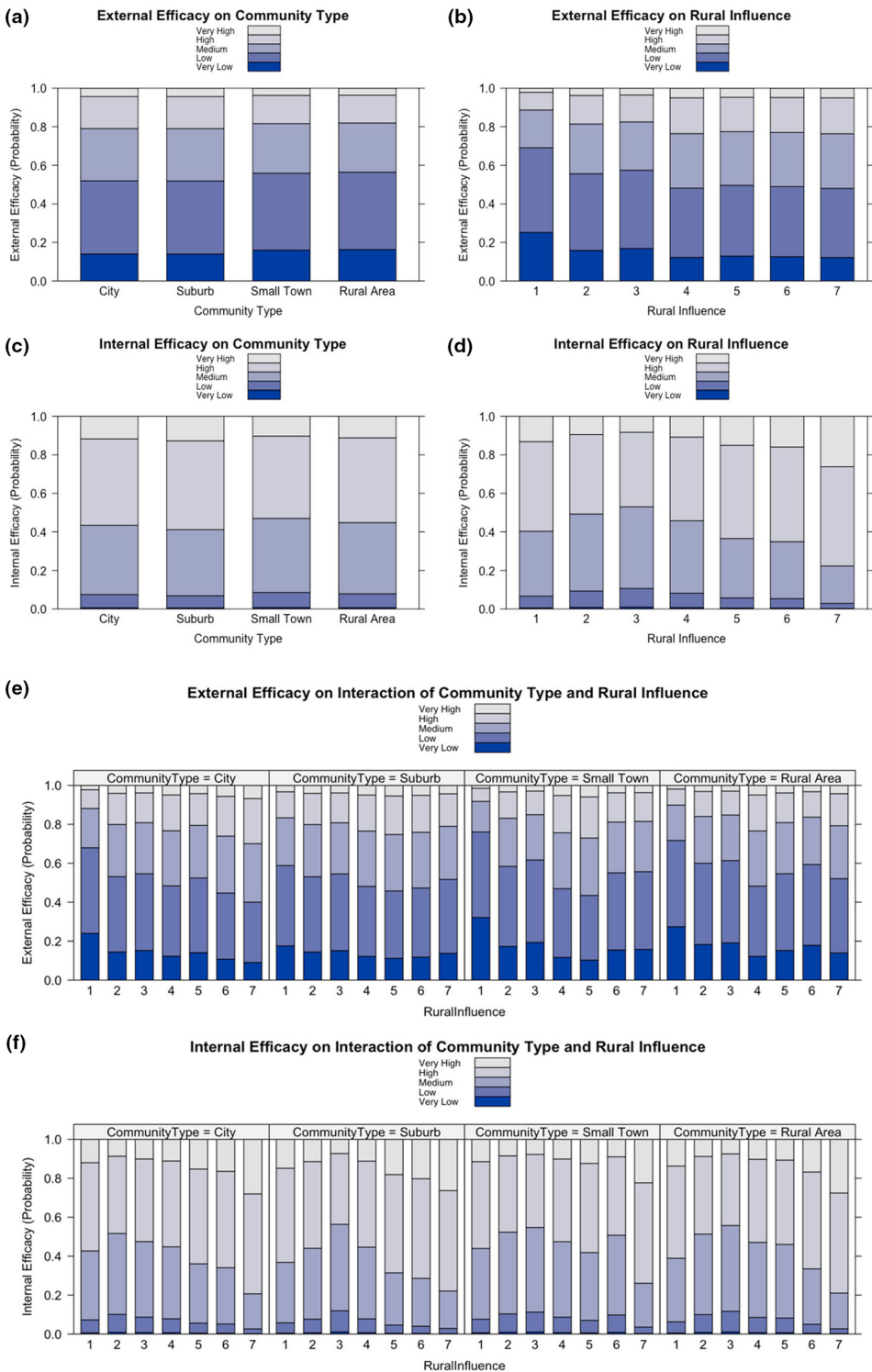


FIGURE 3 Predicted probabilities of the external efficacy and internal efficacy regressed on rural influence and community type.



line (e.g., city/suburbs versus small towns/rural areas) consistently across models. For external efficacy, cities and suburbs were statistically indistinguishable, while small towns and rural areas showed lower odds than cities; for internal efficacy, only small towns showed lower odds than cities, while rural areas did not; and for the perceived influence of small towns and rural areas, the four community types exhibited a gradual change in probabilities (see [Figure 1](#)). This is noteworthy given that according to previous studies, city and suburban residents are similar but have different interests (Munis, 2022) and that suburban residents are often found to be fluid between cities and rural areas (Gimpel & Karnes, 2006).

Another finding is that city residents tend to feel that small towns and rural areas exert too much influence on government, while residents of small towns and rural areas feel that they have little influence on government. This finding is in line with previous sociological studies investigating rural voters' distrust of and resentment toward politicians and their feelings of being ignored (Cramer, 2016; Wuthnow, 2018), as well as with studies finding that urban residents see that vast rural areas have benefited from the electoral system and gerrymandering to obtain more power than they deserve (Brown et al., 2021; Rodden, 2019). The 2020 ANES data confirm the findings of these previous studies.

This study also found that small towns and rural areas demonstrated lower levels of external efficacy than cities (suburban areas were indistinguishable from cities), which implies that small-town and rural residents tend to feel that government is not responsive to their concerns. This finding is in line with similar earlier studies in Europe (see e.g., del Horno et al., 2023; Luukkonen et al., 2022). However, internal efficacy did not exhibit such a strong difference, which may mean that the urban–rural divide is linked more closely to government responsiveness than to people's own understanding of political issues. Future studies could probe this further.

Another important finding is that respondents who believed that small towns and rural areas have too much influence on government tended to exhibit higher levels of political efficacy, although the results were more straightforward on external efficacy than on internal efficacy. This finding is interesting in that people who believe that rural areas have too much influence on government are more likely to be residents of cities or suburbs. The interaction graphs in [Figure 3](#) show that this tendency is clearer in cities than in the other three community types. This means that city residents who feel that small towns and rural areas have too much influence are more likely to feel that their voices are heard by the government and that they are knowledgeable enough to understand politics. This ironic finding may mean that resentment does not emanate from one side only, especially not from the rural side. Some previous studies on political polarization in American society have hinted that it is the resentment on the rural side that causes the divide or that it is rural residents who fight against urban residents; however, this finding supports the idea that the current divide between urban and rural areas is based on an “us versus them” mentality and/or “place-based animosity” toward the other group (see Brown et al., 2021; Kaufman, 2021; Munis, 2022). As discussed, rural residents resent urban residents because they perceive that government caters to the interests of urban residents at their expense. Urban residents resent rural residents because they believe that rural residents have a disproportionate impact on electoral results, which diminishes the impact that urban residents have on government relative to their numbers.

However, even among residents of small towns and rural areas, people who strongly believe that small towns and rural areas have too much influence also demonstrated higher external efficacy than people without this belief. This may mean that people with high levels of external efficacy generally believe that small towns and rural areas wield too much influence, no matter where they live. One possibility is that respondents were thinking about different levels of government when responding to the survey questions. For example, urban dwellers may think that the national government is more responsive to rural areas because of the disproportionate impact rural areas have on national elections. However, they may also believe that their local governments are more responsive to them. Future research might delve deeper into the levels of government that respondents are considering when answering efficacy-based survey questions.

CONCLUSION

This research was conducted using 2020 ANES data to enhance the current understanding of the urban–rural divide and the political efficacy of rural and urban residents. The findings of this study indicate an intriguing paradox in American society: individuals (more often urban or suburban residents) who believe that rural areas have too much influence on government paradoxically feel a stronger sense of their voices being heard by the government compared to those who do not share this belief. These findings reflect in-group biases and place-based resentment between rural and urban residents. However, it should be noted that despite the significance of statistical analysis, caution is required when interpreting the results with this single-year survey dataset. The relationships among the variables should be understood only as statistical associations, not as representing causality, as searching for causality was not a goal of this study. However, future studies could investigate causal relationships using advanced statistical techniques. Moreover, the community type was measured based on the respondents' perceptions, which needs to be addressed in future studies.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no relevant financial or nonfinancial interests to disclose.

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