



The Role of Rural Communities of Color in the 2020 Election

By Olugbenga Ajilore | December 22, 2020

Vast swaths of the media have a limited view of what constitutes rural America. There is a general stereotype of these regions—households who are white, low income, and employed in the agricultural industry.¹ This perception was evident in the aftermath of President Donald Trump’s surprise win in the 2016 election, when journalists went to places to speak with whom they believed were rural residents.² The stories were so prevalent that many were given the term “Rust Belt Diner” journalism.³ This misconception was also evident in the coverage of the coronavirus pandemic in rural communities, where headlines did not include in their descriptions of rural America the various rural communities of color who have been harmed.⁴ Many rural communities of color were hit hard in the initial wave of the pandemic, and while these areas represent rural America, they were not described as such in most reporting. A story on an outbreak in Navajo Nation⁵ in April, for example, did not link the issues plaguing this community to issues in other rural areas, even though the problems were very similar.⁶

The same was true when the media discussed the 2020 election. Some rural communities of color played a role in Joe Biden capturing the White House, but this was not evident from the coverage. (see text box) Several stories depicted Biden’s victory as occurring despite the voting trends among rural voters, without acknowledging the voting patterns of regions with larger communities of color.⁷ Rural communities of color are not a monolith, and their voting patterns shifted for both candidates between the past two presidential elections. There is no simple “cities versus rural” story⁸ that can or should be told about the 2020 elections; nuance and complexity must accompany any analysis on rural America.

Stories about and targeting rural voters focus on predominantly white states in the Midwest such as Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.⁹ Most stories about those states that discussed voters of color limited their analysis to large metropolitan cities such as Milwaukee, Detroit, and Philadelphia.¹⁰ Plus, rural America comprises much more than the heartland, as all 50 states contain rural areas, and many of the rural places throughout the country contain sizable communities of color.¹¹ Two such states are Arizona and Georgia, which have significant populations of people of color in their rural counties. There are important lessons to be learned in the voting patterns in these states that shifted toward Democrats in 2020, after spending decades as reliably Republican.¹²

Native American voter turnout in Wisconsin

Wisconsin is a prime example of the impact of rural communities of color in a swing state. Trump dominated most rural areas in Wisconsin,¹³ but Biden was still able to win the state. In Wisconsin, one county—Menominee—is considered rural and has a large percentage of Native American people. This county is coterminous with the Menominee Indian Reservation. In 2016, the county voted in favor of Hillary Clinton over Donald Trump by a margin of 76.6 percent to 20.4 percent. In 2020, the county went in favor of Joe Biden over Donald Trump by a margin of 82.2 percent to 17.5 percent—a total increase of 8.5 percent in favor of the Democratic candidate.¹⁴ While Menominee County is the least populous county in Wisconsin, this increase in the percentage was crucial in helping Joe Biden eventually win the presidency.¹⁵

Arizona's and Georgia's presidential electoral history

Since 1948, when Arizona voted for Harry S. Truman, the state's voters have chosen the Republican candidate every presidential election except in 1996, when they chose Bill Clinton over Bob Dole by a margin of 46.5 percent to 44.3 percent.¹⁶ In most presidential election years, the Republican margin of victory was in the double digits, highlighting the surprise Biden win in 2020.

In the past, Georgia was a reliable Democratic state until the shift toward the Republican Party beginning in 1964, when Georgia, as well as many other Southern states,¹⁷ voted for Barry Goldwater. Other than voting for native son Jimmy Carter in the 1976 and 1980 elections and voting for Bill Clinton in 1992, Georgia has been a reliably Republican state.

While there were certain dynamics—namely the pandemic and resulting economic downturn—in 2020 that put several states in play, it was not clear that Arizona and Georgia would upend decades of voting history and shift to the Democratic candidate. However, recent history shows how the seeds of local grassroots organizing led to this outcome.

Arizona's shift

Arizona's SB 1070,¹⁸ a draconian anti-immigration law, was passed by the state Legislature in 2010. This law allowed law enforcement officials to question anyone they deemed possibly undocumented and was ruthlessly enforced by then-Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, who was notorious for targeting communities of color.¹⁹ The bill's passage spurred activism on the part of Latino youth, and while it took several years to overturn the law, grassroots activism that began in the aftermath of SB 1070 led to Arpaio's electoral defeat in 2016.²⁰ Several grassroots organizations such as Living United for Change in Arizona (LUCHA), Puente, and Poder in Action worked together specifically to unseat Arpaio. These groups furthered their activism to help residents register to vote in 2018 and 2020,²¹ making the environment ripe for statewide election of a pro-immigration president such as Joe Biden in 2020.

Georgia's shift

In the aftermath of *Shelby County v. Holder*, a 2013 U.S. Supreme Court case that struck down important provisions of the Voting Rights Act, Georgia, like many other states not just in the South but throughout the Midwest and other regions as well, experienced the disenfranchisement of African American voters through purges in the voter rolls and the addition of voter identification requirements.²² This made it difficult for African Americans in both urban and rural settings to have their voices heard. Partly due to this court case, former Georgia state Rep. Stacey Abrams (D) started the New Georgia Project, which first helped people sign up for the Affordable Care Act and then moved toward increasing voter registration as well as helping to improve voter education.²³ This group also has made a concerted effort to reach rural voters not just for top-of-the-ticket elections, but for more local races such as the public service commissioner as well.²⁴ New Georgia Project is only one of many organizations on the ground that have been engaging residents throughout the state to register to vote and to engage the courts in preventing voter suppression tactics. These legal battles were crucial in making sure votes, whether for Republicans or Democrats, were counted in 2020.

In addition, demographic changes in Georgia have led to a decrease in the percentage of registered voters who are white, from 61 percent in 2010 down to 53 percent in 2020,²⁵ with an influx of Asians and Latinos making the electorate more diverse.²⁶ However, as many have found in the aftermath of the 2020 election, this does not necessarily translate into more votes for Democrats. Although people of color are more likely to be Democratic voters,²⁷ this is not a universal truth. For example, within the Hispanic population, Cubans are more likely to vote Republican while those who are of Mexican or Puerto Rican descent are more likely to vote Democratic.²⁸ There is a similar dynamic among Asians, as Vietnamese Americans are more likely to vote Republican, while those of Indian descent are more likely to vote Democratic.²⁹

While Arizona and Georgia were solidly Republican for years, seeds were planted over the past decade that made the prospect of shifting the balance more of a reality. These seeds were not limited to major metropolitan areas such as Phoenix or Atlanta, as many rural areas were ready for their voices to be heard.

Electoral outcomes between 2016 and 2020

The 2020 election saw an incredible increase in turnout of both Democrats and Republicans. National turnout increased by 5 percent, and an analysis of data by the Daily Yonder found that both Biden and Trump increased turnout across the urban-rural spectrum.³⁰

TABLE 1

Both candidates made significant gains in the 2020 presidential election

Change in votes cast for the Democratic and Republican candidates in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, by county category

County category	Democratic candidate gains	Republican candidate gains	Net change
Major metro core	1,450,753	1,318,772	131,981
Major metro suburbs	2,124,821	1,615,555	509,266
Medium metro core	1,435,176	885,535	549,641
Medium metro suburbs	353,360	465,862	-112,502
Small metro	767,355	757,377	9,978
Rural adjacent	320,186	841,631	-521,445
Rural nonadjacent	132,159	224,994	-92,835
Total	6,583,810	6,109,726	474,084

Source: Tim Marema, "Trump Maintains His Large Rural Margin; Democratic Vote Grows the Most in Mid-Sized and Large Metros," The Daily Yonder, available at <https://dailyyonder.com/trump-maintains-his-large-rural-margin-democratic-vote-grows-the-most-in-mid-sized-and-large-metros/2020/11/09/>.

Biden's increase surpassed Trump's increase in most metropolitan categories except for the medium suburbs. (see Table 1) Trump's increase surpassed Biden's increase in both rural categories, both adjacent and not adjacent to metropolitan statistical areas.

The data from Table 1 do not account for the fact that some parts of rural areas contain more communities of color than others.³¹ The county classification scheme from the American Communities Project (ACP) provides further analysis³² that can reveal more about the turnout in rural places with communities of color. (see Table 2)

Table 2 from the ACP report³³ shows that Trump did well almost across the board in rural areas, including Hispanic Centers, rural areas with large Hispanic populations that skew young and low income. In African American South and Native American Lands areas, Trump broke even and increased his percentage over his 2016 showing. One difference between 2020 and 2016 is the sizable third-party showing in 2016 that was almost nonexistent in 2020. Biden did better in Graying America counties, middle-income communities with many seniors and low levels of diversity, and did slightly better in Rural Middle America counties, which are majority white and middle income and have average college graduation rates.

The data from tables 1 and 2 help to explain what occurred in Arizona and Georgia: Arizona has a significant Hispanic population and several Native American communities, and in Georgia, the rural areas have a large proportion of African Americans, and the state is becoming more diverse altogether.

TABLE 2

Both candidates made gains in urban and rural communities in the 2020 presidential election

Comparison of vote share for the Democratic and Republican candidates in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, by American Communities Project (ACP) classification

Metro status	ACP classification	Biden 2020	Trump 2020	Clinton 2016	Trump 2016	Change
Rural	African American South	48.70%	50.10%	48.00%	49.00%	Trump +0.4 points
	Hispanic centers	48.10%	50.30%	47.70%	46.20%	Trump +3.7 points
	Native American lands	46.80%	51.40%	43.60%	48.20%	No change
	Aging farmlands	21.10%	77.20%	19.90%	74.40%	Trump +1.6 points
	Graying America	39.10%	59.50%	36.00%	58.10%	Biden +1.7 points
	Evangelical hubs	23.70%	74.90%	22.90%	73.40%	Trump +.7 points
	Latter-day Saints enclaves	35.20%	61.00%	25.50%	47.60%	Trump +3.7 points
	Rural middle America	35.00%	63.20%	32.50%	61.00%	Biden +0.3 points
	Working class country	25.80%	72.80%	24.60%	70.90%	Trump +0.7 points
Urban	Big cities	66.00%	32.40%	64.90%	29.40%	Trump +1.9 points
	Exurbs	43.30%	54.90%	38.00%	55.50%	Biden +5.9 points
	Middle suburbs	43.60%	54.80%	40.50%	53.90%	Biden +2.2 points
	Urban suburbs	60.00%	38.50%	56.50%	37.80%	Biden +2.8 points
	College towns	53.00%	44.80%	47.80%	44.40%	Biden +4.8 points
	Military posts	43.00%	54.90%	38.20%	55.50%	Biden +5.4 points

Source: Dante Chinni, "The 2020 Results: Where Biden and Trump Gained and Lost Voters," American Communities Project, November 9, 2020, available at <https://www.americancommunities.org/the-2020-results-where-biden-and-trump-gained-and-lost-voters/>.

Arizona

It's possible to look specifically at what happened in the rural counties in Arizona and Georgia. Arizona has 15 counties, seven of which are considered nonmetropolitan.

The major gains for Biden were in Maricopa, Coconino, and Pima counties, which are all urban counties. There were smaller gains for Biden in Apache, Navajo, and La Paz counties. Apache and Navajo are predominantly rural Native American counties, while La Paz is a Graying America area.

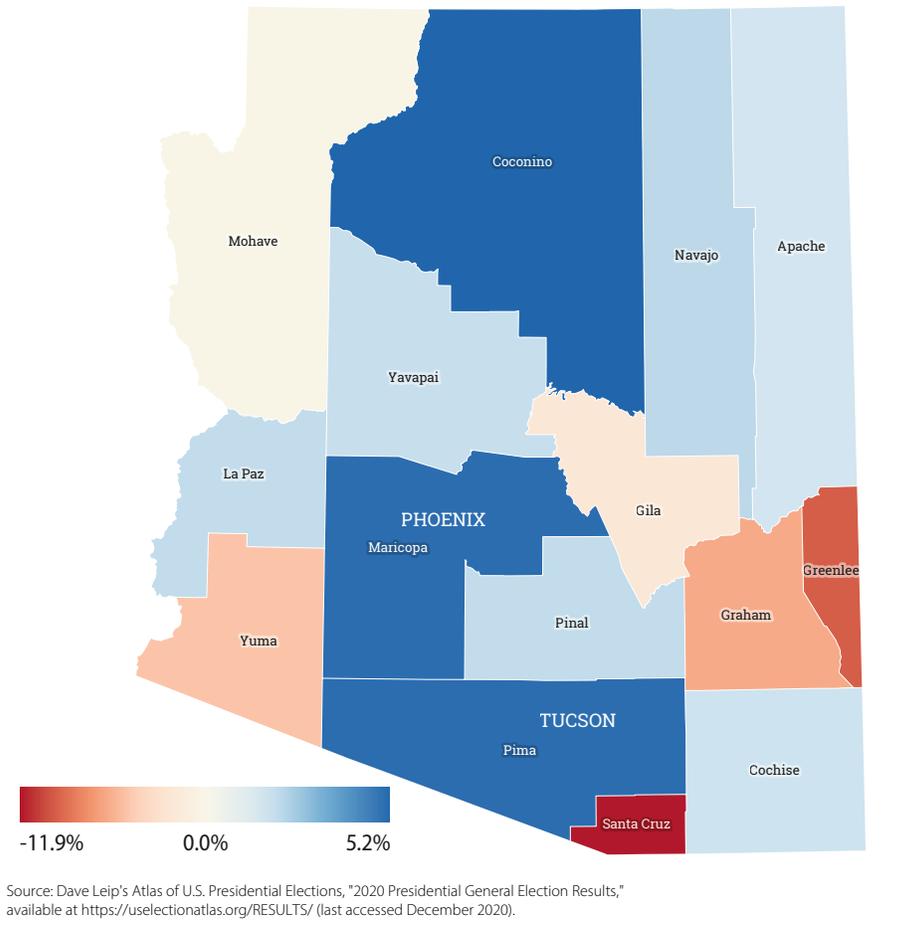
Conversely, Trump saw larger gains in three of the southeastern counties, including a Hispanic Centers county and Native American Lands county. Santa Cruz County has a large Hispanic population but saw a nearly net 12 percent increase in support for Trump. This falls within a pattern of Trump's electoral success in rural Hispanic counties throughout the Southwest.³⁴

In Arizona, Trump still dominated rural counties, but Biden made significant gains among some rural Native American communities. Biden did worse in both Hispanic Centers counties, one of which is rural (Santa Cruz County) and one which is urban (Yuma County).

FIGURE 1

The candidates' major gains in the 2020 presidential election in Arizona varied by county

Change in the Democrat-Republican vote margin from the 2016 presidential election to the 2020 presidential election in Arizona, by county



Georgia

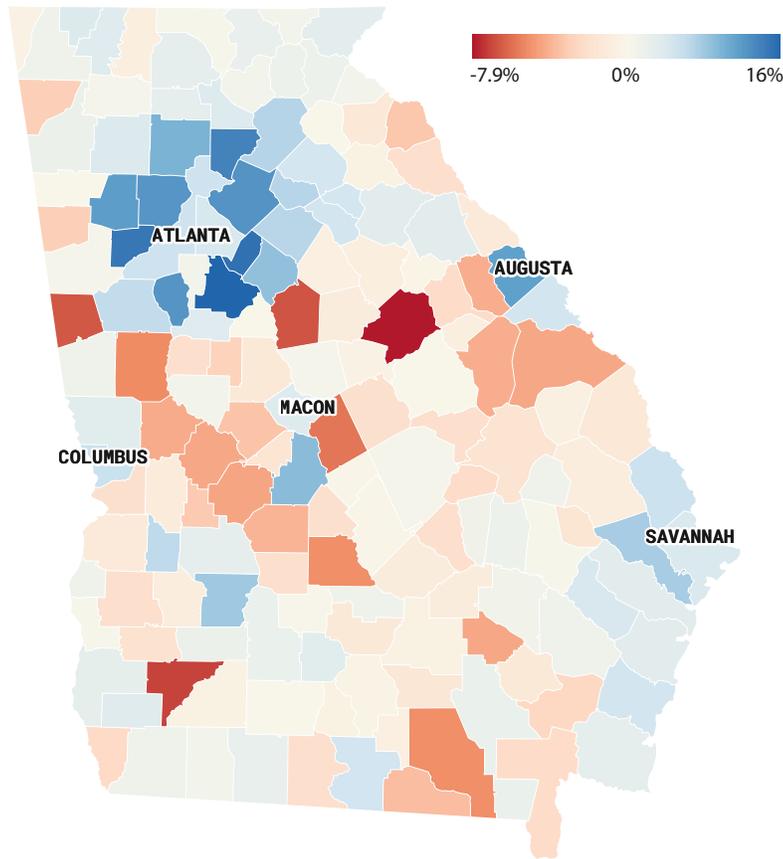
Georgia has 159 counties, and 85 of them are rural. Figure 2 shows that most of the rural counties turned out in greater percentages for Trump, while the counties that turned out more for Biden had smaller gains in magnitudes.

Biden's major rural gains were in the northeast Georgia region that contains the exurban areas of Atlanta and further out. Biden saw his largest increase in the major metropolitan suburbs, increasing the vote total by nearly 200,000 votes.³⁵ He also did well in some of the southwestern and southeastern counties. The campaign made a concerted effort to reach out to Black farmers,³⁶ and several Black candidates for Senate throughout numerous Southern states became more competitive due to this outreach to Black rural voters.³⁷ Some of the rural counties that Biden won were not exclusively Southern African American counties, and some were classified as Evangelical Hubs—communities with many evangelical adherents, few college graduates, and few health centers located in the South—and Military Posts, which are middle-income, diverse communities located near military bases.

FIGURE 2

The candidates' major gains in the 2020 presidential election in Georgia varied by county

Change in the Democrat-Republican vote margin from the 2016 presidential election to the 2020 presidential election in Georgia, by county



Source: Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, "2020 Presidential General Election Results," available at <https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/> (last accessed December 2020).

Conclusion

There is no shortage of words written about a so-called rural-urban divide. However, the story of rural America is far more complex and more dynamic than is normally discussed. Analyses of rural places must reflect this fact. The story of the rural vote should not be presented as a dichotomy of small-town Trump voters versus big-city Biden supporters; it is much more nuanced and must have a racial lens applied to it.

As this brief explored the voting patterns across a variety of diverse rural communities to identify some takeaways, one surprising result is that Biden did not do well with the rural Latino vote in Arizona. While he won Arizona, he did lose votes in some of the rural Latino counties. There have been post-mortems about Biden's general weaker support among Latinos.³⁸

Surprisingly, Trump did not lose votes in rural communities of color. He was able to break even in predominantly African American counties and in predominantly Native American counties. Biden's gains occurred primarily in the suburbs as Trump was able to do well in major metropolitan counties.

Arizona's and Georgia's stories are a microcosm of these two surprising results. While some rural counties turned out for Joe Biden, many others turned out in greater percentages for Donald Trump. The media's view and portrayal of rural voters needs to reflect the diversity and complexity that is the rural reality.³⁹

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Endnotes

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