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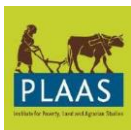


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# Agricultural livelihoods and voting patterns in a rural, southern state

*Rebecca Shelton*

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## **I. Introduction**

Recent political shifts in the western world are characterized by an agenda and rhetoric of nationalism - both in economic and ethnographic terms – and exhibit qualities of authoritarian populism. Much of the support given to these agendas has come from rural regions, but the forces that motivate this political agency are not entirely clear. Political candidates supersede previously established political categories or parties and gain support through the presentation of anti-institution or anti-statist ideologies and personalities while championing the image of a certain kind of “common” people (Hall, 1985; Inglehart and Norris, 2016; Scoones et al., 2017). A populist leader often gains support simply by positioning him/herself as one that is not to blame for negatively received policy outcomes, societal circumstances, or prior governance decisions and remains able to paint themselves as a victim alongside the people even after they are elected as leaders (Hameleers et al., 2017; Müller, 2017). This often comes at the expense of categorically “othering” different groups of people such that there is an outlet upon which blame for the current state of affairs can be placed (Hameleers et al., 2017).

Blame is an assignment of fault that often stems from coping with stress and stressors that are incongruent with one’s goals (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Smith and Kirby, 2010). Stressors perceived as threats with potential to cause personal harm or loss, and that an individual does not have the resources (either personal/internal or material resources) to cope with, can result in affective responses of anger or shame which result in externalization or internalization of blame, respectively (Roseman, 1996; Skinner et al., 2003). Thus, societal contexts in which stress and uncontrollable threats are widespread, may be ripe for authoritarian populist momentum. One form of stress from which populism may arise is, economic stress. The economic inequality perspective argues that working class constituents, frustrated by fewer jobs and decreasing income, resent the current moment and align with the blame culture of the authoritarian political movement (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). A second form of stress is that caused by community or cultural change. The cultural backlash theory contends that populism is fueled by those that wish to resist cultural change and displaced norms (Inglehart and Norris, 2016).

Though election results can often be mapped so that urban and rural divides appear, it is critical for research to approach and examine the “rural” as a heterogeneous and diverse landscape of peoples (Deavers, 1992; Rye, 2006; Rignall and Atia, 2017). For those unfamiliar with rural community dynamics, there may be a tendency to imagine rural constituents as those that live and work in small, insulated communities with primary resource industry economies such as farming. However, though the landscape of rural areas is often still visually dominated by and perceived as farming and farmland, there are few rural areas, especially those located outside of the mid-western United States, that are still economically farm-dependent (Deavers, 1992; USDA-ERS, 2015). Manufacturing, service-sector jobs, and commutes into urban areas for work have been increasing since the 1970s (USDA-ERS, 2009). However, though the majority of rural residents are not economically dependent upon farm income, farming is still culturally important. Much of the rural landscape is managed by farmers and permeated with farm identity and, though descendants of farmers may no longer be farming nor living in the community in which they grew up, they, too, maintain their farm and rural identity (Kayser, 1994; Cassidy and McGrath, 2015).

This research specifically examines the rise of authoritarian populism in the United States through the 2016 presidential election of Donald J Trump. Throughout his campaign (and continued during the presidency), he used rhetorical tactics of authoritarian populism. As stated by Inglehart and Norris (2016), “His rhetoric peddles a mélange of xenophobic fear tactics (against Mexicans and Muslims), deep-seated misogyny, paranoid conspiracy theories about his rivals, and isolationist ‘America First’ policies abroad. His populism is rooted in claims that he is an outsider to D.C. politics, a self-made billionaire leading an insurgency movement on behalf of ordinary Americans disgusted with the corrupt establishment, incompetent politicians, dishonest Wall Street speculators, arrogant intellectuals, and politically correct liberals...Hence Trump’s rhetoric seeks to stir up a potent mix of racial resentment, intolerance of multiculturalism, nationalistic isolationism, nostalgia for past glories, mistrust of outsiders, traditional misogyny and sexism, the appeal of forceful strong-man leadership, attack-dog politics, and racial and anti-Muslim animus.” The “other” was broadly articulated as those that pose a threat to security (i.e. terrorists) and also those that take economic advantage of “us,” the elites (Inglehart and Norris, 2016; MacWilliams, 2016). Specifically, this research will seek deeper insight into the driving forces of politics in the U.S. state of Kentucky, a state in which 62.5% of the voters elected President Donald J Trump (among the top 5 states in terms of greatest percentage of votes won). In addition, the context within the state of Kentucky conceptually aligns with the cultural and economic change arguments that have been previously associated with the rise of authoritarian populism. More recently than other states, Kentucky has undergone an agricultural transition away from the culturally and economically important agricultural commodity of tobacco.

In the 1960s and 70s, the rural Kentucky economy was largely farming dependent and Kentucky still contains the greatest number of farm-dependent communities east of the Mississippi river (USDA-ERS, 2015; Dimitri et al, 2005). In the early 1990s, approximately two-thirds of Kentucky farms were growing tobacco as it was the most profitable cash crop in Kentucky (Snell and Goetz, 1997; Wood, 1998). Tobacco accounted for almost 50% of Kentucky’s crop receipts and was grown in 119 out of 120 counties (Snell and Goetz, 1997; Shelton, 2018). However, the tobacco economy was based on a federal quota and price support program initiated in the 1930s and, in 2004, driven by changes in consumption, and in surrender to neoliberalism, the tobacco program was eliminated. Federal and state policies have supported farmers through the transition via direct payments to tobacco growers that took place from 2004-2014 and supported farm enterprise diversification through cost-share and loan programs (See Shelton, 2018 for more details). Despite these efforts, farm economic adjustments have been a challenge and cultural change in farm communities is still evolving.

This research will examine economic change in the rural state of Kentucky. In order to account for farm households that have recently undergone change, this research will examine changes in net farm income data. However, median income for all households will also be examined given that most rural households are no longer dependent on farm income. In addition, as a proxy for cultural change, changes in the number of farmers will also be assessed.

Last, in conjunction with economic and cultural change data, presidential election voting data from the last thirty years is assessed in order to better understand how the 2016 election compared to historical voting patterns within Kentucky counties.

## **II. Methods**

This research is based upon analysis of data from public government data sources. Trends in average net farm income<sup>1</sup>, median household income of all families within the selected counties (not just farm families), voting statistics, and community and farmer population are assessed. County level data was extracted from the U.S. Agriculture Census Database (1987-2012)<sup>2</sup>, U.S. census database for

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<sup>1</sup> Net income refers to expenses subtracted from profits. This is average income of the farm operation but does include income from off-farm sources

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.agcensus.usda.gov/>

population<sup>3</sup> and income<sup>4</sup>, and the Kentucky government voting database<sup>5</sup> for years 1987 to 2016. The years included in the analysis were such that farm economics could be evaluated pre and post NAFTA which went into effect in 1994. Income data was modified to account for inflation (adjusted to November 2017) using the Bureau of Labor statistics CPI inflation calculator<sup>6</sup>. However, there were some data limitations as census data is not collected annually and voter data was collected only for presidential election years. U.S. intercensal estimates were available and used for population and median household income data. However, data from the U.S. Agriculture Census is reported every five years and was thus linearly interpolated for in-between years using STATA (STATACorp) beginning from 1987 and ending in 2016<sup>7</sup>.

In addition, a linear regression was conducted to more explicitly assess covariation between average net farm income, farmer community dynamics, and the number of voters in presidential elections that voted republican, democrat, or for neither. An OLS regression with community fixed effects at the county level (to control for geographic, market, cultural and tobacco quota variation) was run using STATA software (STATACorp). The dependent variables were number of votes and the independent variables included were county population, average net farm income, median household income (to capture changes in economics in the broader community), number of full-time farmers, number of part-time farmers that spend 1-199 days working off-farm, and number of part-time farmers that spend more than 200 days working off-farm. Due to the fact that presidential election years are only every four years, data included in the regression was that for election years 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2016.

### **III. Results**

#### *Economic Change*

Since 1987, average net farm income has decreased in the Bluegrass, Knobs Arc, and Eastern Coal regions but increased in the western part of the state in the Pennyryle, Western Coal, and Jackson Purchase Regions (Figure 1). Additionally, the range of farm income among counties in all regions, except for the Knobs Arc region, has increased (Figure 1). However, median household income is fairly stable across all regions of the state (Figure 1). This may illustrate that net farm income is increasingly unimportant for stability in community household economics. However, this data does show that household income has, in general, been greatest in the Bluegrass and Knobs Arc regions of the state. The Bluegrass region contains two of the state's largest urban centers – Lexington and Louisville – and the Knobs Arc region borders the Bluegrass.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.census.gov/topics/population.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/saipe.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://elect.ky.gov/statistics/Pages/default.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation\\_calculator.htm](https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Data for 2017 is currently being collected and will be added into the analysis once it is made available in 2018

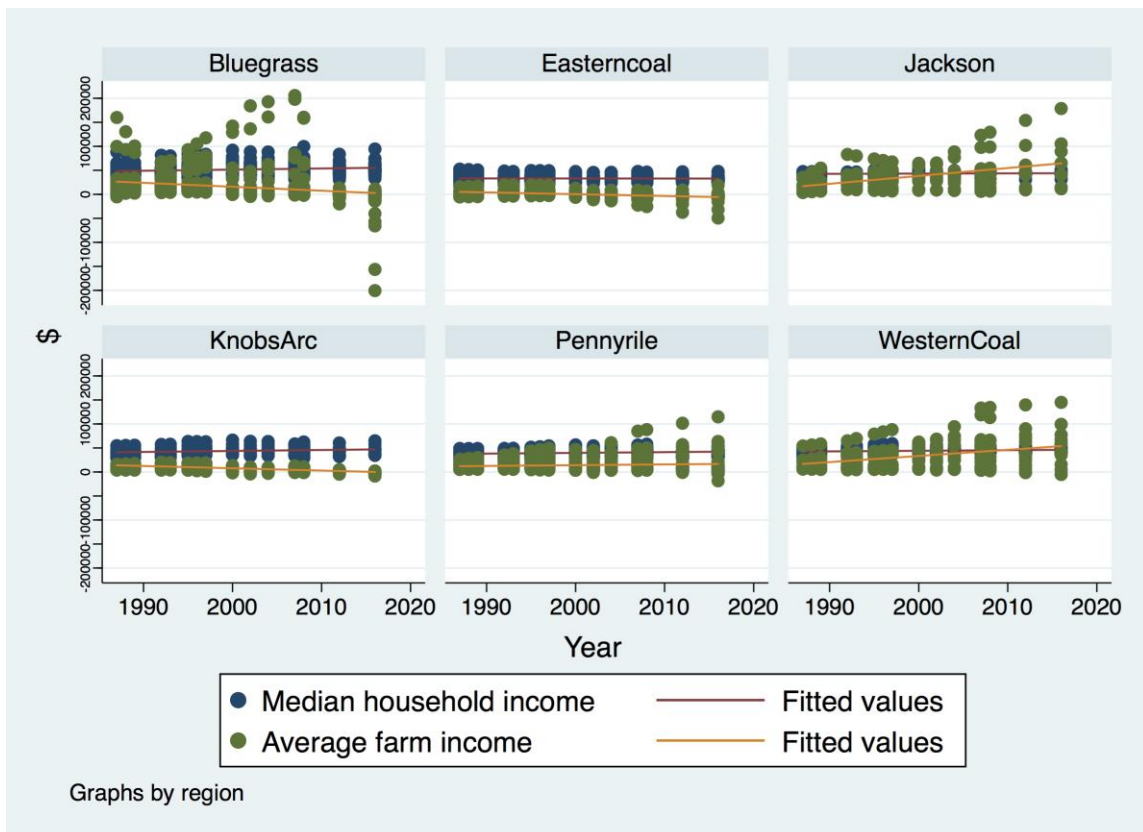


Figure 1: Average net farm income and median household income by county per region from 1987 to 2016.

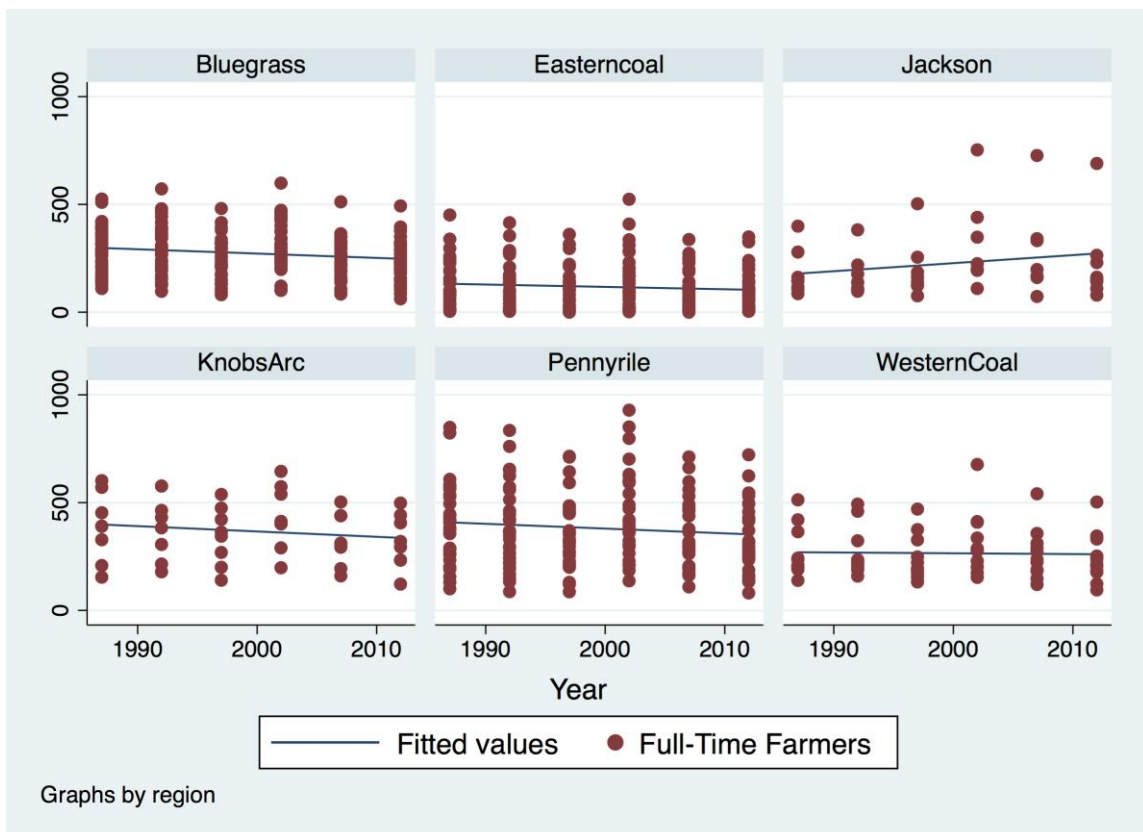


Figure 2: Number of full-time farmers by county in each of Kentucky's six regions from 1987-2012.

### Cultural change

As of 2012, there were 32,137 principal farm operators that farmed as their primary occupation and 44,927 principal farm operators that farmed as a secondary occupation in the state of Kentucky (USDA, 2012). Statistics from the U.S. Agriculture Census database were used in order to quantitatively assess whether the tobacco transition or other economic forces over the last thirty years have impacted the number of full and part-time farmers. If the number of full-time farmers decreased while part-time farmers increased, it may suggest seeds from which cultural and lifestyle discontent might arise within rural communities. Interestingly, in most regions of Kentucky there has been only a slight decline in the number of full-time farmers and in the Western Coal and Jackson Purchase regions of Kentucky there has been a slight increase (Figure 2). Simultaneously, across all regions, there has been a slight increase in the number of part-time farmers that worked less than 200 days off the farm (Figure 3) and, on average, a slight decline in the number of farmers that work more than 200 days off the farm annually (Figure 4). County population was also examined in order to evaluate whether rural out-migration, a well-documented phenomenon across the globe, might be occurring in Kentucky. Interestingly, trends in county population have been somewhat stable within most regions except the Eastern Coal Region in which there has been some population decline (Figure 5).

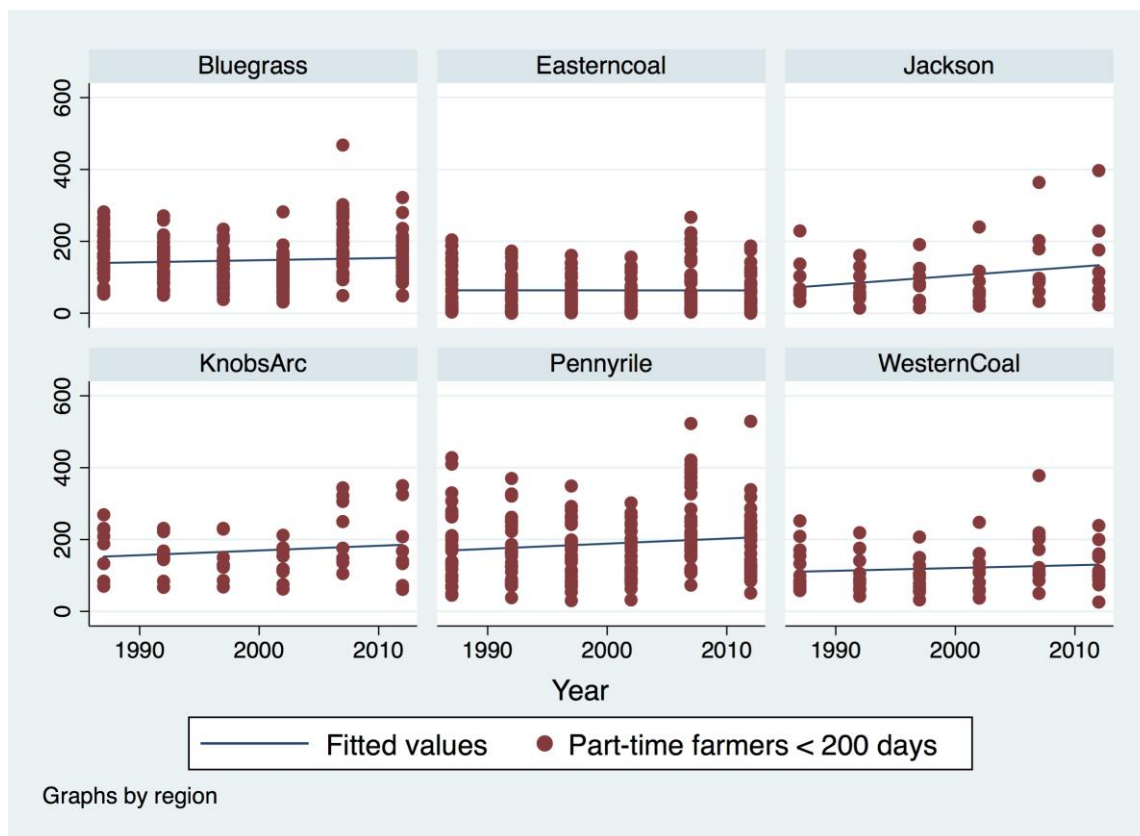


Figure 3: Number of part-time farmers by county in each of Kentucky's six regions from 1987-2012 that worked less than 200 days off of the farm annually.

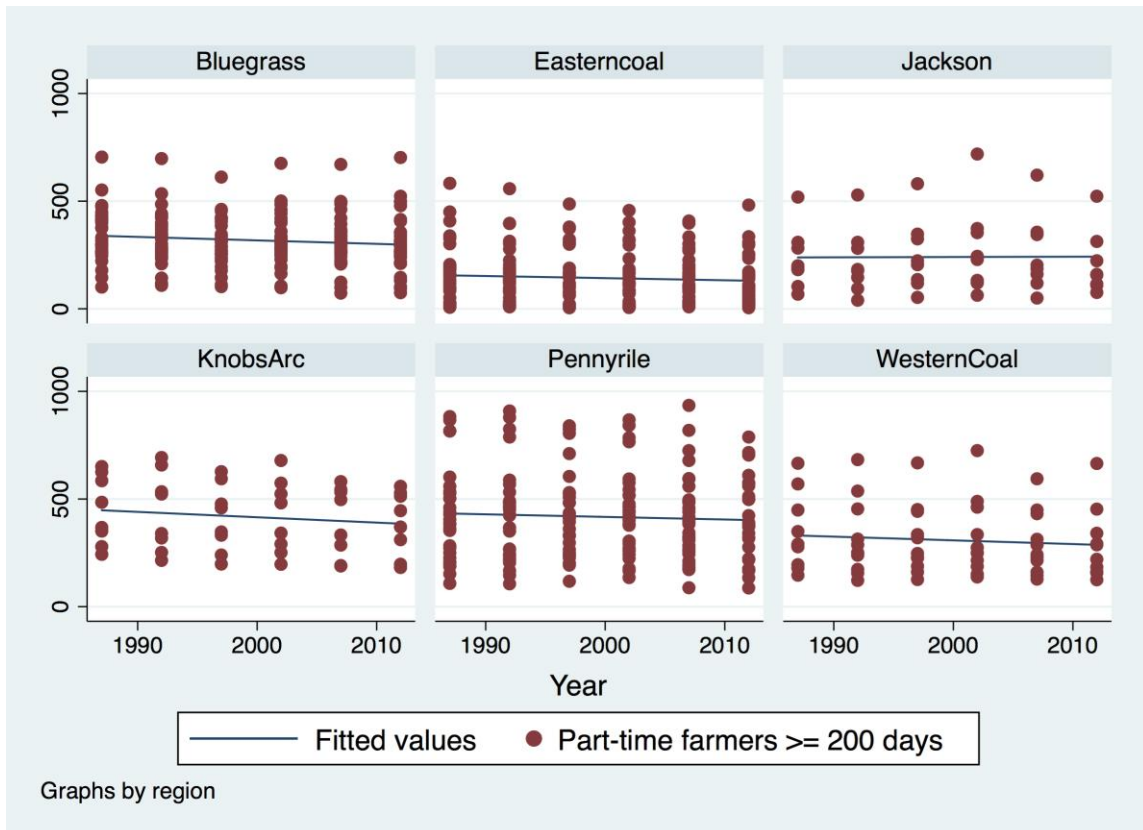


Figure 4: Number of part-time farmers by county in each of Kentucky’s six regions from 1987-2012 that worked more than 200 days off the farm annually.

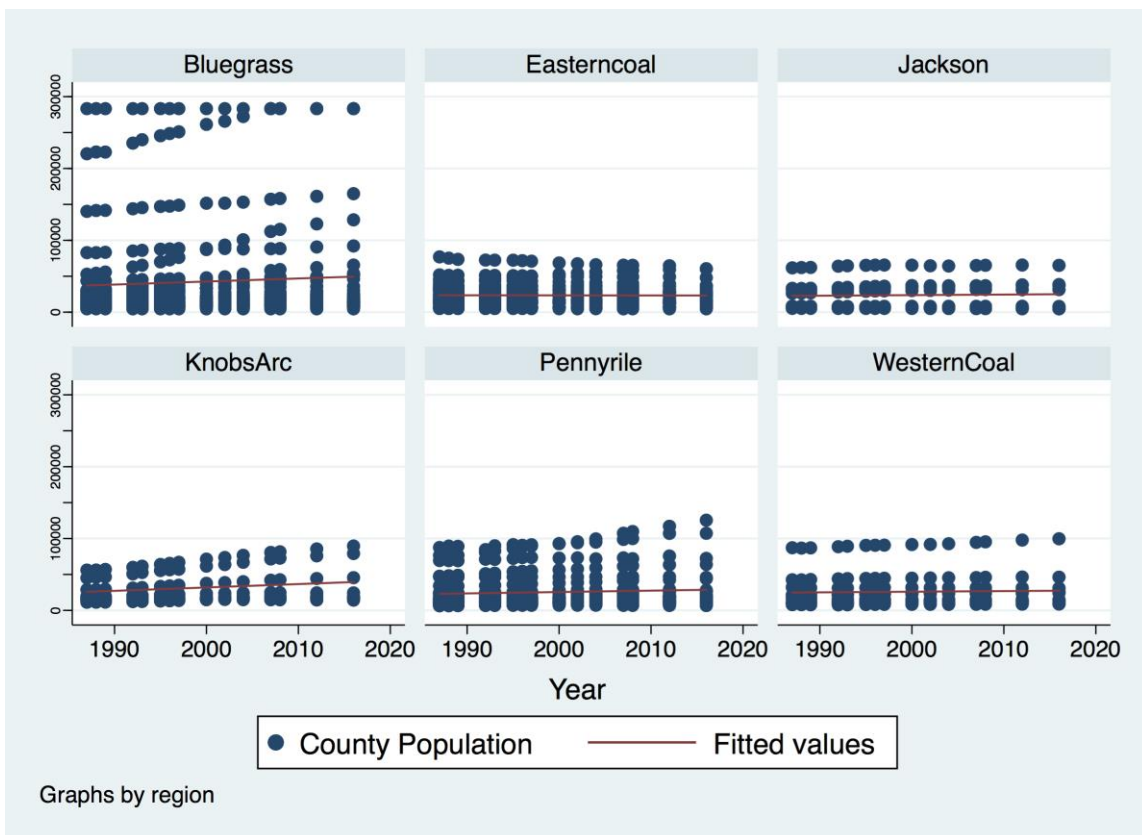


Figure 5: County populations per region from 1988-2016



### *Rural population and alignment with Trump*

In order to begin to understand the voter support given to Trump during the 2016 presidential election and whether or not it might be driven by economic or cultural stress as related to shifts in the size of the farming population and/or the amount of time dedicated to farming, voting patterns across Kentucky were examined for every presidential election since 1988. Since the 1950s, Kentucky's electoral college has reliably voted Republican. The exception has been when Southern Democrats have run for office such as Lyndon B. Johnson (1964), Jimmy Carter (1976), and Bill Clinton (1992 and 1996). Thus, it is important to consider that though voter support for President Trump may have been motivated by his authoritarian populist rhetoric, it was likely also affected by the fact that once he became the Republican Party's candidate, voters may have also chosen to support him due to their loyalty to the Party and the values eschewed by its platform.

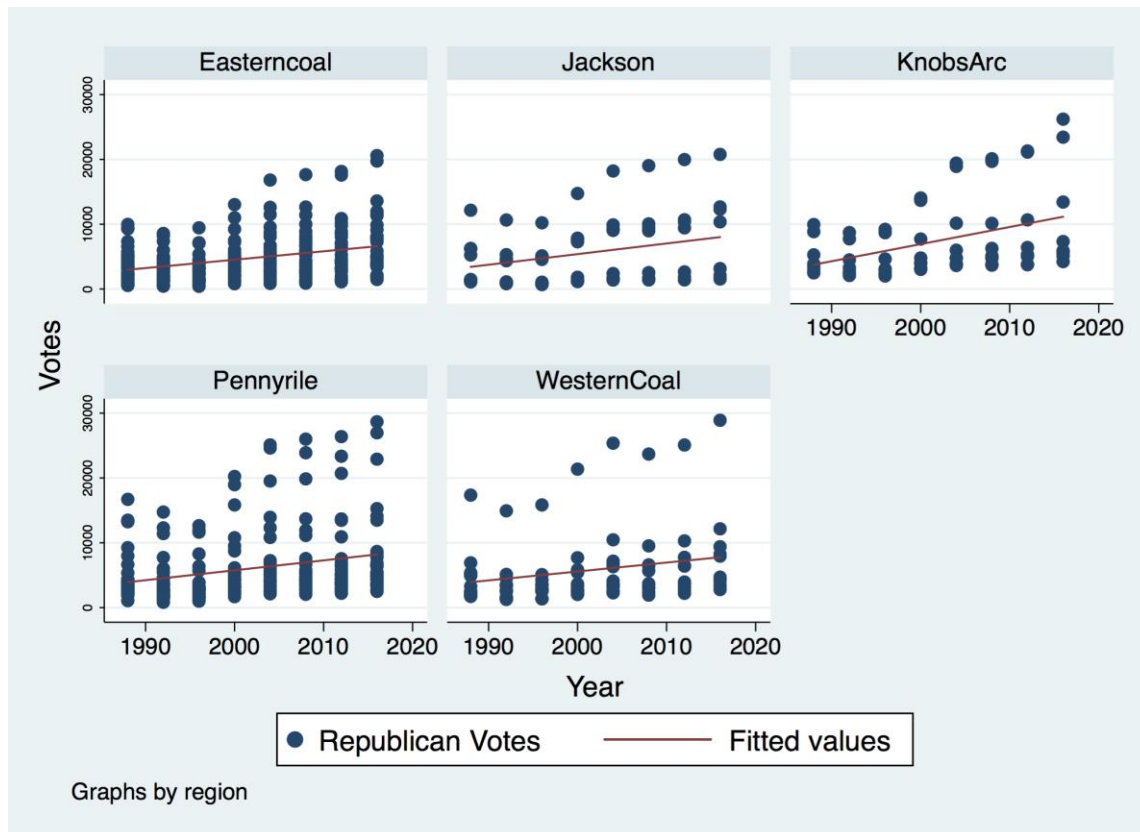


Figure 6a: Number of republican votes in presidential elections from 1988-2016 per county by region (does not include Bluegrass region due to scale differences)

Since 1987, with the exception of the 1992 and 1996 election, the number of republican votes across all regions of Kentucky has steadily increased (Figures 6a,b). Population growth does not seem to consistently account for this trend (Figure 5). Democratic votes have decreased in the Eastern Coal, Jackson Purchase, and Western Coal regions, increased in the Knobs Arc region, and increased very slightly in the Bluegrass and Pennyrile regions (Figures 7a,b). Interestingly, non-voters and independent voters have increased across all six Kentucky regions (Figures 8a,b). Linear regressions were used in order to preliminarily explore covariation between voting patterns and economic and livelihood shifts. Three regressions were run keeping the independent variables constant and changing the dependent variable. Average net farm income, median household income, county population, number of full-time farmers, number of part-time farmers that work less than 200 days off of the farm, and number of part-time farmers that work more than 200 days off the farm were regressed against the number of republican, number of democratic, and combined number of independent and registered non-voters.

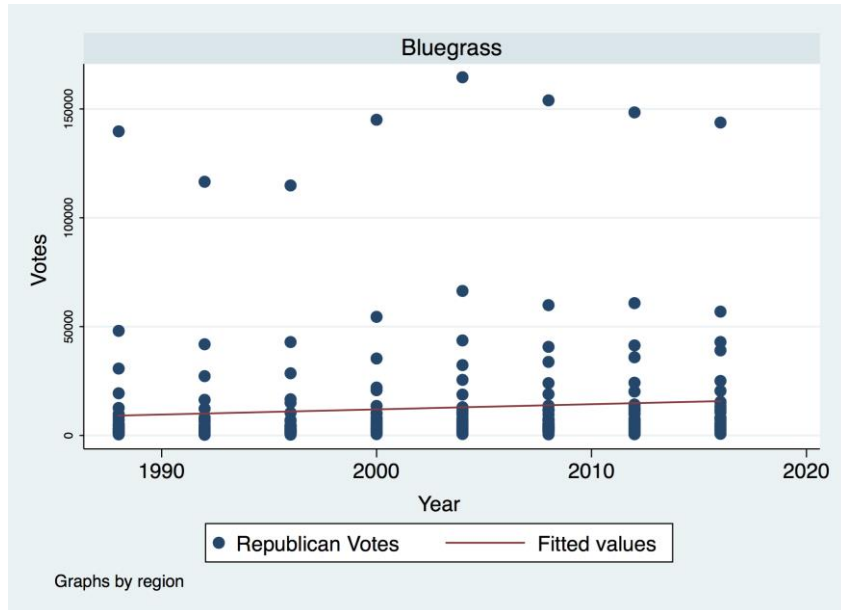


Figure 6b: Number of republican votes in presidential elections from 1988-2016 per county in the Bluegrass Region

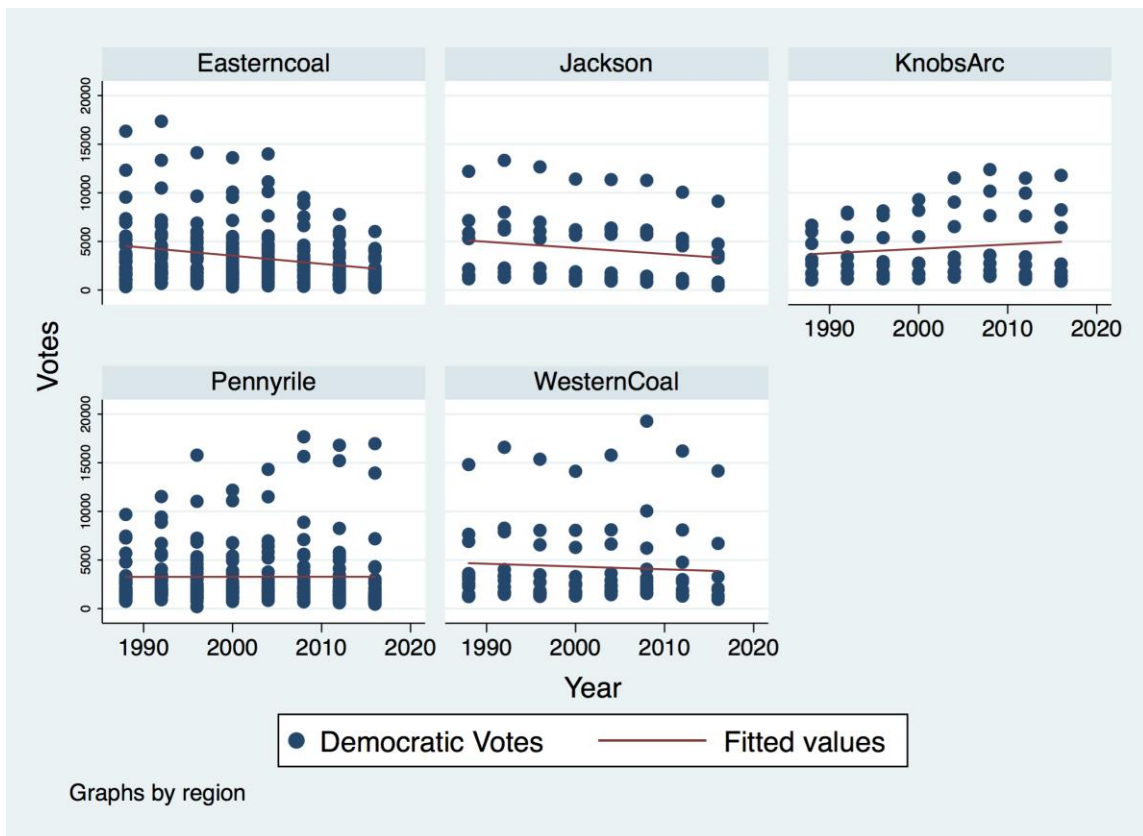


Figure 7a: Number of Democratic votes in presidential elections from 1988-2016 per county by region (does not include Bluegrass region due to scale differences)

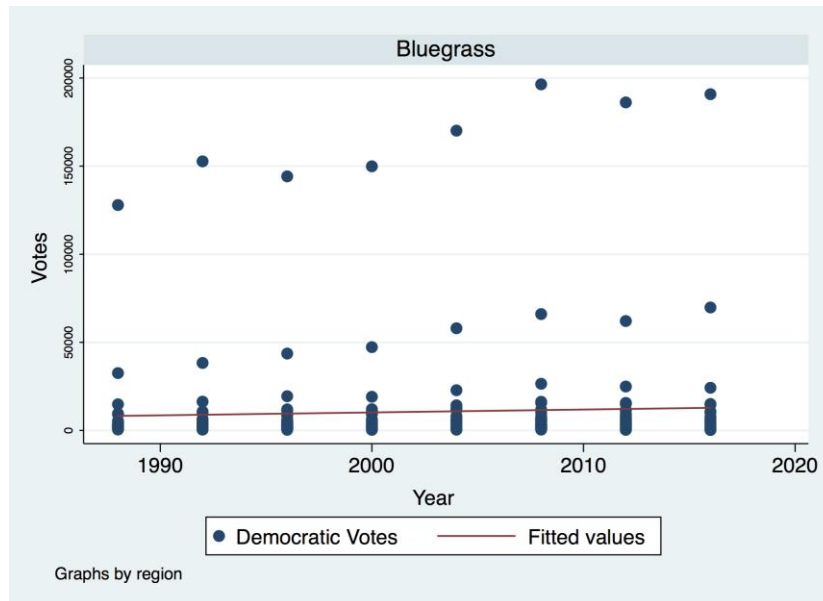


Figure 7b: Number of Democratic votes in presidential elections from 1988-2016 per county in the Bluegrass Region

Population was significant in all three regressions (Table 1). The number of part-time farmers that spend less than 200 days off the farm was significant in two regressions. As the number of these part-time farmers increased, the number of republican votes increased but the number of independent and non-voters decreased. The number of part-time farmers that spend more than 200 days off the farm was also significant and was negatively correlated with number of republican votes. These analyses are preliminary<sup>8</sup>, but the results do not indicate that household economic trends nor average farm income significantly co-vary with voting patterns at the county level. This is supported by the fact that economic and voter trend lines at the regional level are seemingly neither positively nor negatively aligned (Figures 1, 6a, 6b). These analyses do not suggest why there is an increase in Republican votes in counties where there is an increase in farmers working less than 200 days off the farm. However, though speculative, from the data one might hypothesize that this variation could be related to the fact that farmers that were previously full-time have been forced to seek off-farm work and, subsequently, are discontent. An additional hypothesis drawn from the negative covariation between part-time farmers that work 200 or more days off the farm and number of Republican votes is that these individuals are less affected by rural economic shifts because they have not been principally dependent on farm income. They may be those that live on farms primarily in order to pursue a lifestyle in the country rather than an economic enterprise. In order to understand if the 2016 presidential election was different from historical co-variation between income and farmer status and voting patterns, the same regression models were run excluding 2016 data (Table 2). Farm income becomes a marginally significant predictor for number of Republican votes but the coefficient is close to zero. Also, the number of full-time farmers becomes a significant predictor of Republican votes. Thus, one might hypothesize, that in the 2016 election, those who switched into voting Republican were not farmers, but other rural residents thus diluting the relationship between number of full-time farmers and number of Republican votes.

<sup>8</sup> Does not yet include updated farm income data. Relies on interpolated data from 2012. U.S. Agricultural census will release income data from 2017 in 2018.

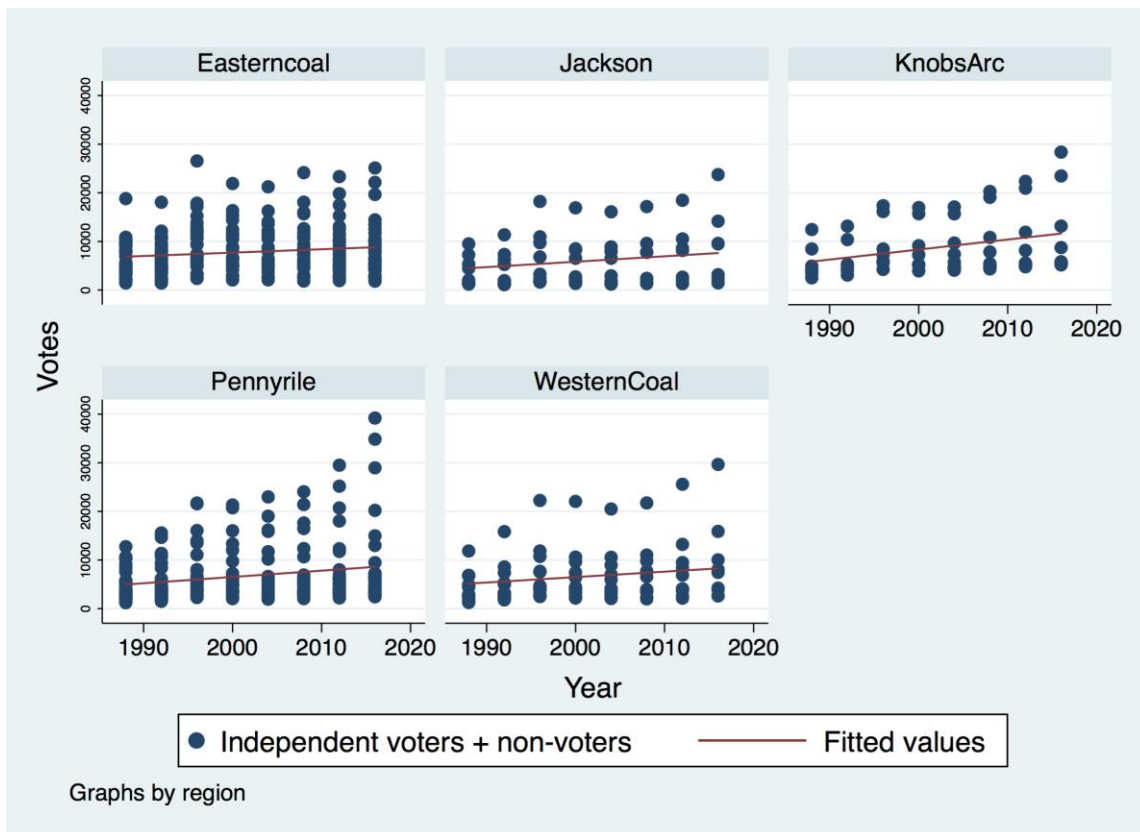


Figure 8a: Number of independent party voters added to the number of registered voters that did not vote in the 1988-2016 presidential elections per county by region (*does not include Bluegrass region due to scale differences*)

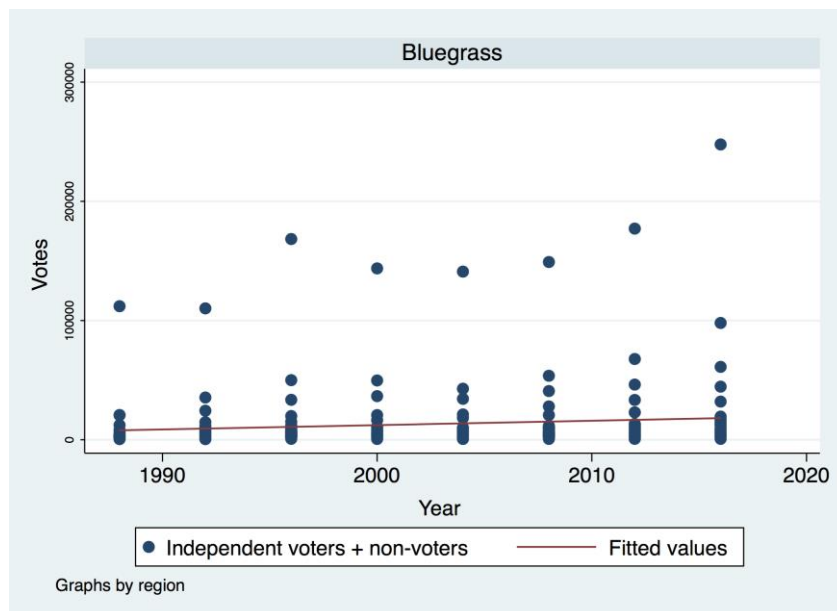


Figure 8b: Number of independent party voters added to the number of registered voters that did not vote in the 1988-2016 presidential elections in the Bluegrass Region

#### IV. Discussion

There is some evidence to suggest that those that voted for Trump may have done so due to his affiliation with the Republican platform, but there is not clear evidence to suggest that farmers cast their vote for Trump purely from a place of economic disaffection. Trump’s populist style and position

as the Republican candidate may have appealed to a wider range of voters than if he had been only one or the other. Interestingly, during the 2016 Presidential campaign both the Republican and Democratic Parties had an “outsider” candidate: Donald J Trump and Bernie Sanders. Though different in many ways, specifically in that Trump articulated blame not only on elitist politics but also against immigrants, they were also similar. They emotionally channeled the anger and frustration of the American and they both spoke openly about the fact that the government has been catering to big interests rather than the American people, especially blue-collar workers (Gillies, 2017). These similarities support the idea that there were certain espoused values and candidate characteristics that specifically inspired Americans to vote for Trump as, according to an analysis of the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, Brian Schaffner, a political scientist, tweeted that 12% of those that voted for Bernie Sanders during the primary election cycle, then voted for Trump in the general election<sup>9</sup> suggesting some kind of candidate substitutability.

Table 1. Number of votes model estimates (data years 1988-2016)

	Republican Votes	Democratic Votes	Independent + No Vote
County Population	0.377 (0.025)***	0.245 (0.084)***	0.422 (0.083)***
ifarmincome	-0.001 (0.004)	-0.007 (0.005)	-0.032 (0.022)
ihouseincome	-0.006 (0.019)	-0.064 (0.046)	-0.030 (0.038)
ifulltimefarmers	0.982 (2.030)	1.404 (1.973)	-3.203 (3.536)
Ipartfarmers<200	4.839 (1.959)**	0.916 (2.002)	-10.792 (3.875)***
ipartfarmers200	-8.770 (2.798)***	-1.489 (7.785)	-25.577 (15.608)
Constant	-1,970.505 (1,599.039)	797.145 (4,812.063)	7,352.430 (7,508.969)
$R^2$	0.43	0.18	0.28
$N$	960	960	960

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses, \*  $p < 0.1$  \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

### *Economy and Culture*

Average net farm income has decreased for some regions of Kentucky but trends in median household income have stayed fairly steady. Though economic inequalities do exist, as is seen between median household income levels of Kentucky regions that host major urban centers of the state (the Bluegrass Region) and other regions, these trends are not new nor strongly impacted by changes in average net farm income at the aggregate county level. In addition, neither average net farm income nor median household income co-vary with the number of Republican votes. Proportionate to the population, there is a lesser increase in Republican votes in the Bluegrass Region when compared to the other regions in Kentucky, but in addition to income levels, the demographics and culture in the two most urban counties contained within this region are different when compared to the rest of the state. Schaffner et al. (2017) examined the influence of economic dissatisfaction, racism, and sexism on voter choices in the 2016 Presidential election and also found that economic conditions played a minor role in comparison to other cultural factors.

However, the quantitative analysis may have missed nuances in economic circumstances given that it was made at an aggregated level (county for regressions and regional fitted trends). First, overall household income of farmers could be decreasing while that of others living in the county may be increasing. Second, the presented income statistics do not capture how many hours of work, how

<sup>9</sup> [https://twitter.com/b\\_schaffner/status/900123993897926661?lang=en](https://twitter.com/b_schaffner/status/900123993897926661?lang=en)

many jobs, or how many farm enterprises a farmer must undertake in order to maintain income; farmers may be working a lot harder and longer for the same amount of profit. Third, though it has been made clear that there are urban-rural divides in the United States, what may also be emerging are fractures and divides that run through rural communities.

One such internal community divide that is economic but was not explored in this analysis, is the divide between those who do and do not receive government assistance. According to a 2012 report, Kentucky was among the five states that received the largest share transfers from the federal government for government assistance programs (Miller and Ku, 2014) and, in general, a higher percentage of rural residents benefit from these programs than urban or suburban residents (Morin et al.). Previous work has found that residents in Eastern Kentucky have low approval for welfare programs as a means for family subsistence and more strongly support efforts to create jobs (Egan, 2000). Similarly, a recent ethnographic study that took place in nine Eastern Kentucky and West Virginia Counties stated that, “Forms of help and aid that promote dependency among able-bodied people are seen as intensely destructive to individuals, families and the region” (Topos, 2015). Given that the Democratic platform is the primary champion for government assistant programs, this resentment internal to rural areas may partially explain why Republican votes have been increasing. In addition, other analyses show that a higher percentage of individuals that are not likely to vote receive government assistance compared to those that are likely to vote. This may correspond to the increase in non-voters in Kentucky (MacGillis, 2015).

Though rural communities may be perceived as economically dependent on specific industries such as farming or mining, at the household level and from the perspective of individuals within these communities, these industries may be that which give individuals *independence* (Topos, 2015). Financial independence achieved through hard work is a core cultural norm for parts of rural Kentucky and other rural regions of the United States (Topos, 2015; Shelton, 2018; Ulrich-Schad and Duncan, 2018) and many may feel that this value is being eroded either due to government assistance or jobs that do not require physical labor. As is illustrated by this example and by other research, culture and economy can be intricately linked and an economic loss may also be felt as a cultural loss (Ulrich-Schad and Duncan, 2018). Greater awareness should be given to the idea that perhaps it is not the amount of income or achieved economic status that is of sole, greatest importance for contentment, as much as the kind of daily work through which that status is obtained. The relationship between finances and stress in farming populations is complex (Schulman and Armstrong, 1989; Gorgievski-Duijvesteijn et al., 2005). For example, Schulman and Armstrong (1989) found that farm families with income between \$10,000 and \$19,000 had lower levels of stress than high income farm families. The work of farming is vocational in that it is not solely of financial importance to many farmers, but is motivated through pursuit of identity and lifestyle preference (Shelton, 2018; Frank et al., 2011). Though this kind of cultural backlash is distinctly different from that related to “othering” references made about specific races or peoples in Trump’s rhetoric, it may have aligned with the nostalgic ring of, “make America great again.” Therefore, it may not always be useful to draw lines between cultural backlash and economic disaffection as two distinct phenomena, but to understand, also, the synergy between them.

### ***Government Dis-trust***

A key element in the success of authoritarian populism with rural constituents and Kentucky farmers may also be derived from a generalized dis-trust in the government- an attitude that populist candidates commonly co-opt to provide support for their “outsider” campaign (Canovan, 1999). According to the PEW Research Center, the public’s trust in the government has been declining since 1964; it fell steadily during the G.W. Bush administration, reached record lows during the Obama administration while, interestingly, showed increases primarily during the Regan and Clinton administrations – two populist candidates (Pew, 2014). One of the major factors contributing to a decline in trust is the perceived influence of money in politics. In a 2015 survey conducted by the PEW Research Center, the reason cited as the biggest problem in Washington D.C. was the influence of special interest money on elected officials (Pew, 2015a) and a measurement of the American

public's agreement with the concept that the government is run by big interests rather than for the benefit of the people very similarly corresponds to that of general distrust (Pew, 2015b). In support of an argument that rural Kentucky constituents prefer decreased government interference, the junior Senator for Kentucky, Rand Paul, is a tea-party member and espouses values of desiring a smaller government. Research shows that only 3% of tea-party supporters trust the federal government "most of the time" (Pew, 2013).

Table 2. Number of votes model estimates (data years 1988-2012)

	Republican Votes	Democratic Votes	Independent + No Votes
CountyPopulation,	0.380 (0.019)***	0.266 (0.082)***	0.360 (0.062)***
ifarmincome	-0.008 (0.005)*	0.007 (0.009)	-0.001 (0.005)
ihouseincome	-0.005 (0.015)	-0.072 (0.042)*	0.024 (0.031)
ifulltimefarmers	6.756 (1.547)***	-1.822 (1.749)	-2.854 (2.269)
Ipartfarmers<200	14.973 (2.299)***	-2.463 (2.188)	-6.853 (3.727)*
ipartfarmers200	-7.265 (3.694)*	-2.848 (9.116)	-18.004 (10.005)*
Constant	-5,472.010 (1,523.133)***	2,104.064 (4,877.556)	3,507.544 (4,419.808)
$R^2$	0.43	0.20	0.33
$N$	840	840	840

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses, \*  $p < 0.1$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Government distrust may also have played a role in farmer voting. Specifically, the dissolution of the federal tobacco quota program may have contributed to distrust in Kentucky farmers in two ways. First, prior to the federal buy-out, the program's guaranteed minimum prices for tobacco acted as a governmental safe-guard for farm profitability but now, as with many other commodities, farmers must negotiate the volatility of a global marketplace formulated to best serve large producers and agribusiness. Indeed, research has found that farmers do attribute partial fault to purchasing companies and market places- big interests- for economic hardship (Shelton, 2018). Second, government role in farming may now be perceived even more strongly as regulatory rather than in support of the farmer given that the tobacco program is gone, the buy-out payments have ended and government role is primarily exercised via enforcement of regulations such as compliance with The Clean Water Act, taxation, and mandated health care.

### *Social Values and the Republican Platform*

Though there is evidence to suggest why voters, regardless of party affiliation, would align with a candidate that rhetorically "othered" and cast blame on the political system itself as well as historical support for the idea that populist campaigns and presidencies foster greater sentiments of public trust, this does not explain voters' ability to support or overlook the authoritarian, racist rhetoric of Trump. Though reasons for which were not explored in this paper, in general, in 2015 only 15% of surveyed Republicans believed that the government was managing the immigration system well and those who viewed immigration negatively were more likely to have expressed anger at the government than those who did not (Pew, 2015c; Cox et al., 2017). In addition to immigration issues, Republicans varied the most from the Democratic party in their belief that the government was sufficiently managing terrorism, access to health care, and economic growth (Pew, 2015c). In essence, as also shown by the steady rather than abrupt increase of Kentucky Republican voters in 2016, it may be that much of Trump's campaign platform is the same that would have been promoted by other Republican candidates in order to appeal to their voter base, though perhaps in a rhetorically different manner.

One may be surprised that Trump's rhetoric was not alarming enough to have undone more of the Republican Party's existing support or diminish his "outsider" appeal. This may be somewhat affected by the fact that we, as humans, either assimilate or accommodate new information. In essence, assimilation means that we try to fit new phenomena, people, concepts etc. into our existing perspectives and knowledge schemas whereas accommodation requires more cognitive energy because it requires that existing schemas and perceptions be challenged and restructured due to accepting that new information conflicts with our previous perceptions of the world (Piaget, 1952). Voters may have chosen to assimilate information about Trump into their existing perceptions or mental definitions of "Republican" or "political outsider" and let go of pieces of information that were dissonant with those definitions. Accommodation, for example, might require challenging one's ideas about the values of the Republican party are - to what extent do they align with President Donald J Trump? There were Republicans that struggled with this throughout the campaign. And, though not without constituency and other consequences, some did defect from the Republican Party by refusing to endorse Trump as their Party's candidate<sup>10</sup>.

## V. Conclusion

Reasons among farmers and other rural voters for casting a vote in support of authoritarian populism are diverse and often embedded in complex, historical contexts. It seems unlikely that rural disaffection can be addressed solely through economic development and increased rural income, particularly if that development is neither culturally sensitive nor accounts for the lifestyle preferences of rural communities. In addition, it is important to closely examine the diverse mentalities that individuals may have held when casting a vote; was a vote cast for the party or for the candidate, himself? For a specific campaign value or idea, or the entire suite of values and ideas? Last, it is important as researchers to question the motivation for this angle of research and questioning regarding the rise of authoritarian populism among rural constituents. What do we do with this information? How do we begin to address the concerns and stressors of the rural constituency, of farmers, regardless of whom they voted for? Why do we seek to increase our understanding of the causal trigger and factors that characterize this urban-rural political divide? Is it in order to be able to affix blame and provide a clearer understanding of "us," the self-perceived supporters of democracy and equality, versus "them?" Already, from a hasty effort to categorize those that support authoritarian populists, a rhetoric of poor, backward, redneck, uneducated, and racist has arisen to characterize those in rural regions who voted for these political shifts rather than a concerted effort to understand the root cause of stress, demand for change, and the heterogeneity of this demand across the rural landscape. This line of investigation must be pursued with careful, internal reflection of our aims and intentions as researchers so as not to increase the urban-rural divide but instead support cross-cultural empathy and an improved understanding of the unique and diverse contexts from which support for authoritarian populism was/is gained.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2016/08/04/488518658/clinton-republicans-trump-democrats-see-whos-defecting-this-election>



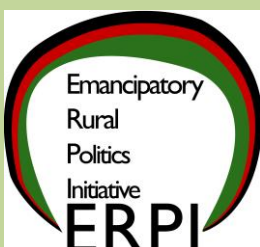
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**The Emancipatory Rural Politics Initiative (ERPI)** is a new initiative focused on understanding the contemporary moment and building alternatives. New exclusionary politics are generating deepening inequalities, jobless 'growth', climate chaos, and social division. The ERPI is focused on the social and political processes in rural spaces that are generating alternatives to regressive, authoritarian politics. We aim to provoke debate and action among scholars, activists, practitioners and policymakers from across the world that are concerned about the current situation, and hopeful about alternatives.

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