Are the good times really over for good? American political nostalgia's relationship with rurality, authoritarianism, and victimhood.

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ARE THE GOOD TIMES REALLY OVER FOR GOOD?
AMERICAN POLITICAL NOSTALGIA’S RELATIONSHIP WITH
RURALITY, PARTISANSHIP, AUTHORITARIANISM, AND VICTIMHOOD

By

Chancellor R. Peterson
B.A., University of Louisville, 2021

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A Thesis approved on

April 11, 2024

by the following Thesis committee:

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Adam Enders, for his steady guidance and patience. Without his mentorship, this thesis would not have been possible. I would also like to thank the other committee members, Dr. Melissa Merry and Dr. Mark Austin, for their comments and assistance. Many thanks to the Political Science department and the Graduate Student Council for funding this project.

I sincerely thank my bride-to-be, Brittany, for her ceaseless encouragement and boundless love. And not least, many thanks to my family for their never-ending support in all my endeavors, especially Momma, Dad, Sis, Cort, Caine, Auntie, Uncle Andy, and my late Nana and Papa.
ABSTRACT

ARE THE GOOD TIMES REALLY OVER FOR GOOD?
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Chancellor R. Peterson

April 11, 2024

There are many discussions about why rural and urban Americans exhibit different attitudes about politics, partisan loyalties, and ideologies. Some of these differences can be explained by psychological processes and traits. People act differently and influence (or are influenced by) political processes differently based on their perceptions of and emotions regarding the past, present, and future states of the world. The same is true with rural and urban Americans. This research will investigate the effects of one potent emotion on political attitudes: nostalgia. Prior research has indicated that political nostalgia can be harnessed as a strong political tool. This thesis is focused on teasing out whether rural and urban Americans exhibit different magnitudes of political nostalgia. This is important because it might help explain why these two groups of people respond to different political stimuli and associate with different political groups. For exploratory purposes, this study will also analyze nostalgia’s relationship with partisanship, victimhood, and left- and right-wing authoritarianism.

The results of my unique survey instrument indicate that Americans are a very nostalgic people across all demographics. Regression analysis showed that there is a weak relationship between rurality and nostalgia, likely due to the relationship being conditional on partisanship. Nostalgia
also shares a positive and statistically significant relationship with partisanship, victimhood, and right-wing authoritarianism. These results indicate the ubiquity of political nostalgia across many different attitudes and demographics.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

“I wish a buck was still silver
And it was back when country was strong
Back before Elvis and before Viet Nam war came along
Before the Beatles and "Yesterday"
When a man could still work and still would
Is the best of the free life behind us now?
And are the good times really over for good?”

(Haggard 1981)

When Merle Haggard sang these chart-topping country lyrics in 1981, Ronald Reagan had just thumped Jimmy Carter in the 1980 election with the message “Let’s Make America Great Again.” Amidst an uncertain future, stagflation, and an economy in distress, Merle and Reagan found success in America’s collective longing for the past. Famously, this message resonated with the American people a second time in 2016 when Donald Trump made it the cornerstone of his campaign. “Make America Great Again” reminded Americans of decades past when “times were good.” Ironically, these “good
times” were often the same eras Ronald Reagan and Merle Haggard were so eager to leave behind in favor of an even more distant past.

However, this is not another research paper about Donald Trump. Nor is it a paper about Ronald Reagan or Merle Haggard. Rather, it is about the emotion from which each of them profited: nostalgia. Specifically, this thesis is about nostalgia’s effect on rural Americans, a group of people who, based on a cursory survey of popular culture, personal narratives, and literature on the rural-urban divide, seem especially prone to harboring nostalgic attitudes.

In politics, nostalgia is everywhere. However, nostalgic memories do not usually mirror perfectly recited histories. Political memories are often distorted through nostalgic rhetoric and imagery. This is used as a tool to encourage continuity in times of perceived cultural, economic, and societal shifts (Stefanik 2021). Nostalgia is used to garner support for specific policies that protect a group’s fundamental essence and sense of tradition. At first glance, one may believe nostalgia is a largely conservative emotion while longing for the future is associated more with a liberal agenda. “Forward,” urged Barack Obama. ‘Make America Great Again,’ replied Donald Trump” (Jacobs 2018). However, nostalgia is utilized by both ideologies, albeit in response to different motivations (Stefanik 2021). Conservatives experience more homogeneity-focused collective nostalgia (e.g., longings for a perceived past with a less diverse population), whereas liberals experience more
openness-focused collective nostalgia (e.g., longings for a perceived past more devoted to civil rights). Hibbing et al. (2017) also determined that Democrats and Republicans both harbor feelings of nostalgia. However, they are more likely to pine for the eras they perceive their respective party to have been in power. For example, a Republican is more likely to view the 1980s more favorably than a Democrat because of the perception that the 80s were the “Reagan years.” The same is true with a Democrat’s perception of the 90s and the “Clinton years.”

Due to its use as an effective political tool, nostalgia has also been linked to populism in many electoral systems. Wiles (1969) argues that populism is founded on a dislike of “the present and the immediate future” by seeking “to mold the further future in accordance with its vision of the past.” This “vision of the past” is directly created by and through nostalgic attitudes. According to Elçi (2022), “[p]opulists constitute a new ideology of home – a vision of the lost homeland – which represents nostalgia for a reconstructed past and, in turn, provides a sense of security against the perceived loss of identity.”

While political scientists have broadly discussed and probed nostalgia’s relationship with conservatism, populism, and authoritarianism, no research investigates nostalgia’s relationship with rural and urban citizens, specifically in America. Due to the sizable cultural, economic, vocational, and political differences between rural and urban America, one could reasonably
conclude that the two groups also behave differently in how they remember the past within the context of the United States’ political history.

There is no debate that a political chasm exists between rural and non-rural America. However, discussions among political scientists exist about the divide’s degree and reason for existence. Frank (2004) has argued that elites communicate to rural and urban voters differently; therefore, the rural-urban divide is a pervasive issue driving American politics because the two groups have manufactured different priorities for themselves. However, Sellers (2013) argued that the divide is not as prevalent as it may seem; metropolitan and non-metropolitan voters exhibit mostly the same political behaviors because of metropolitan-centric attitudes that have flourished since the 1970s, even in rural areas. This position argues that the dawn of interconnected mass media has effectively muted the differences between rural and urban Americans.

The rural-urban dichotomy is a natural choice to further explore nostalgia’s effects on two different groups whose lifestyles and perceptions are markedly different. Rural communities are often more static, with less movement in and out of the community, especially in rural southern and western United States (Garasky 2002); families usually stay in the same communities for generations. Rural communities consume different types of media (Peñaloza 2001); Western movies and country music, staples of rural America, are renowned for their themes of the past. Merle Haggard's songs
come to mind. Lastly, rural communities have historically latched onto candidates who have promised a return to the past; Donald Trump and Ronald Reagan overwhelmingly won rural counties in their combined presidential campaigns (Oberhauser et al. 2019).

This thesis aims to determine if nostalgic attitudes affect rural and non-rural Americans differently and, if so, to what degree these differences exist. By employing an original survey instrument fielded on a random sample of Americans older than 18 years old, it was determined whether respondents were rural or non-rural Americans. This was done by asking respondents to self-identify on a rurality scale. Then, a battery of statements meant to invoke nostalgic attitudes were ranked using a standard Likert scale to measure the respective levels of nostalgia. This collected data was then analyzed using regression analysis, controlling for other possible explanations for nostalgia, such as partisanship, ideology, and age. Other characteristics were also collected from respondents and analyzed.

In addition to examining nostalgia’s relationship with rurality, my survey was meant to parse out nostalgia’s relationship with partisanship, victimhood, and left- and right-wing authoritarianism. Partisanship is a key independent variable in the United States that determines people’s attitudes about a litany of topics. It is important to examine this relationship because it will be possible to determine whether there is an interaction effect between rurality and partisanship, which can show how much rurality actually plays
a role in political nostalgia. Victimhood was also measured for exploratory purposes because it is a psychological trait that seems to be correlated with many political attitudes as well as current topics of interest, such as conspiratorial thinking (Armaly and Enders 2021). It makes sense that someone who feels victimized today may be more nostalgic for a perceived political past that was more kind to them. Lastly, nostalgia’s relationship with left- and right-wing authoritarianism was also explored. This is because populist leaders who often represent these two extremes regularly use nostalgic language to garner support for extreme government overreach to solve issues important to that side (Elçi 2022). A right-wing authoritarian may possess nostalgic attitudes because they long for a return to the country’s perceived “glory days” of military might, while a left-wing authoritarian may be nostalgic for a perceived time when corporations/Wall Street were subjected to more government oversight or taxation. Partisanship, victimhood, and authoritarianism act as different angles to explore the framework of political nostalgia and will hopefully lead to new questions that can be tested in the future despite the focus of the thesis on nostalgia and rurality.

The relationship between rurality and nostalgia is important because it represents an area of political science that can potentially help explain other phenomena like polarization, Americans’ historical perspectives, and the rural-urban divide itself. While this thesis does not seek to answer the
ancient question of whether “the good times are really over for good,” this research does hope to determine whether rural Americans are more likely to answer such a question in the affirmative.

Results

The results of the survey indicated that, in general, Americans are highly nostalgic. These high levels of nostalgia cut across all partisan persuasions, ages, education levels, and income levels. This may be due to the tightly intertwined nature of personal nostalgia and political nostalgia. Most people are nostalgic for their own personal pasts, especially their adolescence, and so this gets conflated as political nostalgia as well. For example, a person who misses their personal circumstances of growing up in the 1980s may be more likely to have political nostalgia for that time even if that political period cuts against their political attitudes today. However, further testing on the differences between personal and political nostalgia is needed to make this conclusion.

The results also indicated that conservatives and Republicans are generally more nostalgic than liberals and Democrats. Based on prior research and basic assumptions about these groups, this comes as no surprise. However, it is important to note that both groups are still highly nostalgic, conservatives and Republicans just more so.
Political nostalgia also begins to decrease as age increases; however, some young people (born all the way up until the mid-2000s) still exhibit high levels of political nostalgia. This indicates that many young people are nostalgic for time periods in which they were not even alive to experience. Younger people may be relying on the highly malleable personal historical narratives of older Americans (including social media, media personalities, and politicians) to color their nostalgia for certain eras. This result indicates that younger Americans can be persuaded by nostalgic rhetoric as well.

The results also indicated that right-wing authoritarianism and victimhood have a positive and statistically significant relationship with political nostalgia. On the other hand, left-wing authoritarianism’s relationship with political nostalgia is shown to be negative and not robust.

The main focus of this thesis, rurality’s relationship with nostalgia, was, unfortunately, not as related as I had hypothesized. Based on a linear regression of nostalgia on rurality, there is a positive, albeit weak, relationship between rural Americans and levels of political nostalgia. But when other independent variables are controlled for, this relationship disappears. This does not mean there is no relationship between rurality and nostalgia; rather, in America, rurality is so tightly correlated with partisanship and ideology that any of its effects are diminished when controlling for partisanship. While the relationship between rurality and nostalgia is not as strong as I had predicted, these results serve as another
marker for just how dominating partisanship and ideology are in the
determination of political attitudes in America.

Directions for future research include finding better ways to measure
ture rurality (including creating an improved rurality scale), examining
differences in personal and political nostalgia, comparing political nostalgia
between different races and ethnicities, and exploring psychological reasons
for why victimhood has such a strong relationship with political nostalgia.
CHAPTER II
PREVIOUS LITERATURE ON THE TOPIC

i. Nostalgia

The term “nostalgia” has Greek roots, a combination of nostos—‘return home’—and algia—‘a painful condition’—and can be roughly translated as a painful yearning to return home (Davis 1979). The word was coined in 1688 by Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer after observing the phenomenon among Swiss soldiers fighting abroad. The term was also applied to cloistered monks struggling to adjust to their new communities. For many centuries, nostalgia was solely considered a medical condition that needed to be treated by a doctor (Sedikides et al. 2004). It was a disease. Despite its medical origins related to one’s homeland, nostalgia has taken on a more amorphous definition over the past several centuries and has been applied in different disciplines, especially with the advent of modern psychology. Batcho (2013) traced the history of nostalgia as a concept and found that nostalgia has been constructed and reconstructed multiple times with shifts in history and academic emphasis. This messy etymology has created a word that is not a
term of art but rather a vague term that can take on many different meanings.

Due to this complexity, its uses must be specifically defined for this thesis. Nostalgia is often used to describe one’s longing for one's own personal past. However, nostalgia can also refer to a collective historical past that an entire group of people experienced together (Wildschut et al. 2014). For this thesis, which examines perceptions about America’s political and historical past, this collective longing for the past will be referred to as ‘political’ nostalgia to differentiate it from ‘personal’ nostalgia or a more general ‘collective’ nostalgia. It is further important to differentiate between personal and types of collective nostalgia because research has shown that the emotions invoked by personal and collective nostalgia may be different (Marchegiania and Phau 2010). Namely, personal nostalgia corresponds with higher levels of ‘happy, warm, and fuzzy’ feelings than collective nostalgia does. Also, one may have collective nostalgia for a certain past but not personal nostalgia. For example, Smeekes et al. (2014) found that individuals had a collective nostalgia due to autochthony (perceived greater entitlement to their home country), which resulted in a belief in less expressive rights for Muslim immigrants; however, this belief did not occur in a similar fashion when only accounting for personal nostalgia.

Incidentally, nostalgia can also be defined in different lights: positive and negative. Sometimes it is described as existing with an inherent tinge of
bitterness (Sedikides and Wildschut 2016). Through a more positive lens, Stauth and Turner (1988) have defined nostalgia as yearning for “some golden age of heroic virtue, moral coherence, and ethical certainty, a period in which there was no gap between virtue and action, between words and things, or between function and being.” This “golden age” could also be described as the ‘glory days.’” The ‘glory days’ interpretation is more closely related to how nostalgia was utilized and defined when creating the survey instrument and writing this thesis.

In psychology, personal nostalgia has been found to be an influential device for managing negative emotions and existentialism (Routledge et al. 2008) (Juhl et al. 2010). Psychologists refer to these devices as “terror management functions.” Through a series of experiments, Routledge et al. explored and manipulated relationships between thoughts of mortality (existentialism) and nostalgia. They found that when thoughts of mortality were prevalent, those participants were more prone to feelings of nostalgia and, in turn, to perceive life to be more meaningful and less likely to think about thoughts of death. When those researchers manipulated levels of existentialism and nostalgia, they found nostalgia to be an effective buffer in decreasing death thoughts. More generally, Routledge et al. have found nostalgia to be an effective resource that enhances mental health and well-being (2013).
This enhancement is likely due to the coping strategies created by more nostalgic individuals (Batcho 2013). Batcho found that “nostalgia proneness correlated with the use of adaptive coping, including emotional, social support, expressing emotions, turning to religion, and suppressing competing activities, and did not correlate with escapist or avoidance strategies, including denial, behavioral disengagement, and substance abuse.” Nostalgic attitudes may also increase individuals' ability to provide emotional support for others (Wildschut et al. 2010). In short, nostalgia is now considered a positive and impactful factor in personal psychology. This is a far cry from the “disease” it was originally described as.

In the social sciences, collective nostalgia’s benefits are less clear and not always positive. Collective nostalgia is often described as an important factor in group-based identities. Group-based identities often operate under an us versus them framework (Greene 1999). Nostalgia exacerbates in-group/out-group distinctions by manufacturing a past reliant on subjective memories in which perceived threats from “the outside world” did not exist; furthermore, nostalgia strengthens shared social identity and distinguishes the in-group from other groups (Brown and Humphreys 2002). At the collective level, “nostalgia confers sociality benefits to the ingroup (favorable attitudes, support, loyalty, collective action, barrier to collective guilt), but it is also associated with negative sides of sociality such as out-group rejection and exclusion” (Sedikes and Wildschut 2019).
Because nostalgia helps build animosity between groups with different visions of the past, nostalgia has been argued to have been a tool populists use to breed support through the us-versus-them mentality. Elçi (2022) found a close relationship between higher nostalgic attitudes and affinity toward populism in datasets from Turkey. One interesting insight into this study dealt with the relationship between collective nostalgia and current feelings of satisfaction with an individual’s current life. Elçi concluded, contrary to other theories, that respondents satisfied with their lives are just as likely to harbor nostalgic and, therefore, populist attitudes. This phenomenon is not endemic to right-wing populists, though. Elçi also noted on page 710, “While right-wing populists may use nostalgia more widely than left-wing populists, Bolivar nostalgia of Chavismo and the United Socialist Party of Venezuela is the most prominent counterexample to this argument. Another contemporary example is US Senator Bernie Sanders, who instrumentalizes nostalgia by emphasizing a period when the working class in the United States lived in better conditions than they do today.” Marandici (2022) has found empirical evidence that electoral support for the left in post-Soviet Moldova is a result of nostalgic voting.

Many studies have linked right-wing populism with nostalgic rhetoric and attitudes (Steenvoorded and Eelco 2018; Gest and Mayer 2018). Specifically, Gest and Mayer explored the effects of “nostalgic deprivation,” which they defined as” the discrepancy between individuals’ understandings
of their current status and their perceptions about their past.” For example, an individual who feels highly victimized in modern society but did not feel that way decades ago based on their own memories of the past would be considered to have nostalgic deprivation. Gest and Mayer’s results indicated that high levels of nostalgic deprivation among white individuals in America and Britain have helped foster the rise of right-wing populism in those two countries in recent decades. Lammers and Baldwin (2020) have also found that collective political nostalgia moderates support for right-wing populist rhetoric.

Nostalgia is also associated with themes of disenfranchisement and “being left behind” (Smeekes 2015). Because it is a group-based emotion that benefits the in-group but hampers intergroup relation, “national nostalgia positively predicts tendencies to protect national ingroup identity, via a stronger sense of ethnic, national identity.” Strong evidence suggests similar attitudes color racial resentment in rural America. Wuthrow (2018) has documented frustration in rural communities that minorities and immigrants were perceived to be receiving handouts that the white members of the community were not.

Democratic voters in other countries are often nostalgic for authoritarian pasts even if that past would be crueler to the individual’s social and/or economic status if it were to rematerialize in the present (Kim Leffingwell 2023; Prusik and Lewicka 2016). Kim Leffingwell explored this
phenomenon in the context of South Koreans who harbor nostalgic attitudes for the pre-democratic order in their country. Interestingly, he concluded that these feelings, while not logical, were important social tools. Specifically, these attitudes that helped foster social connectedness and memories of an authoritarian past were still considered valid feelings for the purposes of building political support. This demonstrates the important in-group effects nostalgia can create, even if that past was not a democratic or happy one.

Political elites have discovered subtle ways to tap into nostalgic attitudes. Scholars have found that political leaders recall the names of dead leaders to invoke positive feelings (Andrews-Lee and Liu 2021). Andrews-Lee and Liu examined the speeches of former Argentinian President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and found that as her approval rating decreased, her invocation of a popular deceased party leader increased. This finding is currently playing out in US politics too. Amidst a faltering approval rating, Joe Biden’s 2024 State of the Union address to Congress invoked the names of Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Ronald Reagan—three former Presidents remembered in America today with much esteem and optimism (Biden 2024). One can also see this subtle nostalgic messaging take place in the names of proposed legislation by President Biden and members of Congress like the “Green New Deal.” This anecdotal evidence of politicians using references to the past and readapting it for the current political climate
suggests that political calculations based on nostalgic manipulation play out in the highest levels of government and channels of communication.

Hibbing et al. (2017) explored Americans’ attitudes about the past and employed two important models: the generational model and the political model. Hibbing et al. used the “decade” as the unit of analysis because the decade is one of the few time units that have significant meaning to Americans, even if attitudes about the qualities of a particular decade are rarely nuanced. Using the generational model, they found that Americans are generally most nostalgic for the decade in which they grew up in or came of age. For example, an individual born in 1958 might be most nostalgic for the 1970s because that is when they spent the bulk of their teenage years—the period in a person’s life they often experience important milestones and remember favorably for their newfound freedoms. Under the political model, Americans remember more fondly eras they associate with their respective political party being in control. For example, Republicans look most favorably on the 1950s or 1980s because that is when they perceive their party to have been largely in control. Alternatively, Democrats are more likely to remember fondly the 1960s or the 1990s when the Democratic Party exerted greater political control. Interestingly, most individuals of either party did not fondly look back on the 1970s. Perhaps this is because there is no clear partisan regime to define the 1970s as Eisenhower, Kennedy/Johnson, Reagan, and Clinton were able to do.
Bartels and Jackman (2014) also used a generational approach to argue that Americans’ understanding of the past and their current political persuasions and attitudes are based on their age when political “shocks” occurred. Shocks are basically any important and memorable political event such as an election, new policy, war, recession, assassination, etc. Different weights of importance are placed on these shocks depending on the generational cohort an individual belongs to—this is because “adolescent political experiences play a substantial role in shaping partisan identities throughout the rest of that individual’s life.” Based on Bartels and Jackman’s model, “a 65-year-old in 1972 would have given the political events of the Roosevelt administration (when he was in his late 20s and 30s) almost 30% more weight in the formulation of his current party identification than the events of the decade he had just lived through—including the civil rights movement, Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, race riots, assassinations, and the war in Vietnam, up through and including McGovern.” This model can be applied to individuals of all generations.

Bartels and Jackman warn that this does not mean that individuals never update their political orientations, or forget political events, or that they keep a constantly updated “running tally” about which party is “winning” or “better,” but rather “early experiences color their perceptions of subsequent political events.” While Bartels and Jackman’s research deals less with nostalgia and more with experience and memory’s general effects on
partisan loyalty, there is the implication that political nostalgia’s ability to influence political attitudes today is due to dynamic factors such as age and political shocks. That is to say, political nostalgia may exist, but its ability to influence an individual’s current political attitudes varies.

Other researchers have solely analyzed nostalgia’s relationship with partisanship and ideology in the United States. Stefanik et al. (2021) re-examined the idea that nostalgia only plays a role within conservative spheres. They found that nostalgia plays a role among liberals too. However, conservatives ‘nostalgize’ about perceived period of homogeneity and liberals nostalgize of perceive periods when society was more open to the cultures and traditions of other people. For example, conservatives may have nostalgic attitudes for a past perceived to have less immigrants and religious diversity while liberals may have nostalgic attitudes for a past they perceive to be more devoted to civil rights or religious ecumenism. These findings are also supported by the research of Kenny (2018) and Mudde (2017). However, Stefanik emphasizes that nostalgia is still more prevalent among conservatives because the past was generally more homogeneous and less open to diversity.

The main conclusions to draw from past literature on political nostalgia are (1) people can illogically be nostalgic for the past; (2) political nostalgia is generally stronger among conservatives; (3) political elites utilize
nostalgia as a political tool; and (4) there is an important interplay between generational effects and political nostalgia.

ii. Rural-Urban Divide

Rural regions almost always have sharp differences with their urban counterparts. But the mechanisms that cause these differences, especially in politics, are not always so clear. In the United States, political scientists have often squabbled over the causes of the rural-urban divide. As this divide has continuously and more clearly mirrored partisan lines in recent decades, the discourse has become more important as discussions regarding polarization have flourished. Before examining prior research on these mechanisms, I must first discuss some of the root differences between rural and urban America to provide a material background that may account for some political differences downstream.

The most obvious difference between rural and urban America is the importance agriculture plays in rural America. However, there are other important differences that color the lifestyles and experiences of rural Americans. Rural communities are served by inferior infrastructure, especially internet access (although this has improved in recent years) (Whiteacre 2007). Rural communities have lower life expectancies due to fewer healthcare resources (Abrams 2001). Urban Americans generally have higher levels of employment than rural Americans (Cromartie 2018). Rural residents are more likely to suffer psychological issues due to isolation
(Lanier and Maume 2009). Substance abuse in rural areas, especially opiate abuse, tends to start at earlier ages and persist longer through an individual’s lifetime (Young et al. 2012). Rural Americans also tend to have different tastes in media, specifically in music and greater affinity towards cheap entertainment (Peñaloza 2001). Rural America has more static populations, with less movement of young adults out of the community, especially in the southern and western United States (Garasky 2002), although in recent years, there have been conversations about rural America’s “brain drain”. The low levels of emigration and immigration in and out of rural communities help foster a more homogeneous culture, further sharpened by the fact that rural areas tend to be dominated by white Christian communities.

In contrast to the difficulties rural America faces, urbanization has vastly improved the livability of American cities (Glaeser 2011). Glaeser finds there is a strong correlation between urbanization and economic development all around the globe. Alternatively, “urban alienation theory” posits that living in urban areas undermines mental health, isolates individuals socially, and “encourages deviation from traditional social morality” (Geis and Ross 1998). Urban alienation theory differs greatly from the perception many people have about rural places, including rural America.

The perception of rural America is a positive one. Most Americans think of rural America as a serene natural place with tight-knit communities
founded on solid morals and long-standing traditions (Keiter 2017). The entire community comes together on Friday night for the football game, Saturday afternoon for the farmer’s market, and then Sunday morning for church services. These perceptions lead rural Americans to have strong place-based identities. A place-based identity is “an individual’s sense of place as how they conceptualize themselves (Diamond 2023). Place-based identity is an example of a social identity. Social identities have become increasingly salient in forming the political attitudes of Americans. (Green et al. 2002; Huddy 2001; Mason 2018). For example, many people in my homeplace of Breckinridge County, Kentucky, are quite proud to be from that rural community. This goes so far that they are apt to illogically criticize neighboring counties—counties that are essentially the same in every way to Breckinridge County. These identities go further than just geographic location and also account for the physical settings, human activities, and social interactions that are associated with that locality (Brandenburg and Carroll 1995). Rural identities are an important source of lifestyle choices and attitudes, everything from automobiles driven (a Dodge Ram as opposed to a Subaru Forester), music listened to (country as opposed to hip hop), and the shoes worn (Ariat boots as opposed to collector Nikes) (Ching and Creed 1997).

Diamond (2023) also explains that rural Americans deeply criticize urban areas to bolster their own rural identities. This is known as “place
comparison.” For example, a rural Americans may point out high crime rates, high costs of living, and general unfriendliness in urban areas to highlight their own identity. Anecdotally, as an individual from a rural area who currently lives in an urban area, I hear concerns about metropolitan crime from rural friends at a much higher rate than my city friends, who are the ones who should statistically be more worried about being carjacked or mugged.

Rural identities have strengthened as an important social identity in the twenty-first century. This is largely due to a phenomenon known as social sorting. As Diamond notes:

“Social sorting, the process through which people increasingly sort themselves geographically and socially into homogenous identity groups (Mason 2016), contributes to the increasing political salience of rural identities. As people in urban and rural areas share fewer and fewer overlapping identities, the differences between the two groups become more apparent, and physical location becomes an increasingly important part of one’s identity” (Diamond 2023).

This sorting seems to have picked up after the 1996 presidential election, and especially after the 2008 presidential election. Prior to that, both major parties were able to claim sizable portions of supporters in both rural and urban America. However, since then, rural America has become
overwhelmingly Republican, and urban America has become overwhelmingly Democratic.

Gimpel et al. (2020) have tied this partisan dissonance directly to the *physical* distance between rural and urban America. Because the two groups live far away from each other and are subjected to different population density levels, they have less face-to-face interaction with each other (which is more effective than other forms of communication) and two distinct cultures are developing. They compare to the evolutionary biology concept that a species will evolve differently if separated from another group of the same species due to differences in external inputs such as climate and food sources.

Gimpel et al. also argue that population density is an important factor because a larger population density allows for greater anonymity and, subsequently, the ability for subcultures to develop that are aberrations of the status quo. Diverse subcultures are potent fertilizers for progressive/alternative lifestyles and identities. In comparison, a low population density renders anonymity impossible and subcultures are not permitted to form out of the ‘monocultures’ that exist in rural communities.

These ideas about distance and population density are certainly interesting, however, I believe Gimpel et al. are over-simplifying the complexity of the rural-urban divide. Distance and density may be easy ways to distinguish the two groups, but they are likely not root drivers of the
divide. There are too many other social, economic, and cultural reasons for the rural-urban divide. This theory seeks to explain too much with too little.

In the controversial book, *What’s the Matter with Kansas*, Frank (2004) also attempted to explain the reason for the urban-rural gap. He argued that rural and urban voters are communicated to differently by elites and, therefore, the rural-urban divide is a pervasive issue driving American politics because the two groups care about different problems. Republicans increasingly tend to stress social “culture-war” issues to rural voters even if such support is detrimental to those same voters’ economic foothold, while Democratic messages that may be favorable to rural economic interests are largely ignored, such as expansion of government funded health insurance programs. Frank’s book has many valid criticisms, but it cannot be denied that culture-war issues are deeply seated areas of concern in rural communities.

Alternatively, Sellers et al. (2013) argue that the political divide is not so prevalent, and metropolitan and non-metropolitan voters exhibit mostly the same political behaviors because of metropolitan-centric attitudes that have flourished since the 1970s, even in rural areas. This is due to the rise of mass media consumption, especially social media, which has consolidated political messaging, interests, and attention across rural-urban boundaries. This argument is perhaps believable in economic and marketing terms of
consumer sentiment and taste, but the political divide between rural and urban America seems much too wide to dismiss outright.

iii. Theoretical Argument

I argue that the political and cultural differences between rural and urban America not only influence their attitudes about politics now but also color their memories about the past, specifically their political nostalgia. Because rural Americans are generally more traditional in their values and lifestyles, I believe it makes sense that they would be nostalgic for a past they feel is more closely aligned with what they wish their future to be, namely, more homogenous, morally unambiguous, problem-free, technologically simple, and better able to provide for them and their families. I believe urban people may be less nostalgic for the past because the livability of cities has greatly improved in recent decades, urban dwellers are generally less traditional, and a greater variety of sub-cultures in urban America lead to fertile ground for alternative/progressive lifestyles and attitudes that are generally less oriented towards memories of the past. I am not expecting urban Americans to not be nostalgic at all, but rather, just to a lesser degree than rural Americans. I am not sure how this theoretical argument works out causally, but I am confident that these many factors lead to an affirmation of my hypothesis. So, Hypothesis 1 is as follows:

\[ H1: \text{The more rural a person is, the more likely they are to exhibit greater levels of political nostalgia.} \]
Increased nostalgia due to traditional values means that other variables associated or not associated with traditional values may influence the measured levels of nostalgia other than rurality; namely, ideology and partisanship. It has already been established that partisanship now mirrors the rural-urban divide. Therefore, it is also important to test the effects of partisanship and ideology on political nostalgia. This test seeks to confirm previous findings that conservatism is positively correlated with political nostalgia, which will also help establish the validity of my measurement of nostalgia. Hypothesis 2 is as follows:

\[ H2: \text{Conservatism and Republican Party identification are positively correlated with political nostalgia.} \]

iv. Victimhood

I will also be exploring the relationship between victimhood and political nostalgia. Victimhood is technically an undesirable trait. By its standard definition, people generally would prefer not to be dominated or controlled by external forces. However, playing the role of a victim is a highly important political identity in America today because it is a means to achieve greater social status based on modern norms that victims should receive greater social deference (Armaly and Enders 2022). Armaly and Enders found that perceived victimhood does not necessarily align with actual victimhood. Americans often play the victim to constructs they are not actually being dominated by: immigrants, income inequality, or China. It is a reasonable
assumption that many people who feel victimized remember a point in their lives in which they did not feel like a victim. It is likely, then, that individuals who score high in victimhood also score high in political nostalgia. Thus, Hypothesis 3 is as follows:

\[ H3: \text{Feelings of victimhood are positively correlated with political nostalgia.} \]

v. Left- and Right-wing Authoritarianism

Finally, I will be exploring the relationship between left- (LWA) and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) and political nostalgia. As noted, right-wing populism and nostalgic rhetoric has already been shown to have a positive relationship and it has been theorized that left-wing populism does as well. Because left-wing and right-wing authoritarians often use populistic tools to curry favor with supporters, I believe it is important to decipher whether both flavors of authoritarian attitudes are correlated with political nostalgia. This will shine light on what types of issues nostalgia is most effective in influencing. Because LWAs and RWAs both use examples from the past and the “glory days” as models on how to mold the future, I believe that LWA and RWA will both have positive relationships with political nostalgia. These findings, while new, would blend well with past research that correlates right-wing populism with political nostalgia.

\[ H4: \text{LWA is positively correlated with political nostalgia.} \]

\[ H5: \text{RWA is positively correlated with political nostalgia.} \]
CHAPTER III
SURVEY METHODS

My original survey instrument was created using Qualtrics and was fielded using Lucid. Lucid is an online crowdsourcing tool that allows researchers to pay a randomized group of individuals to take the survey. The respondents in this survey were restricted to the United States and had to be 18 years or older. Each respondent was paid $1.50 for taking this survey. There were several attention check questions spread throughout the survey to ensure proper time and concentration were being devoted to the survey. If these questions were not properly answered, then those respondents were discarded. Also, several questions were asked for exploratory purposes, but were not ultimately deemed relevant measurements for the main purposes of this survey: nostalgia, rurality, victimhood, LWA, and RWA.

The first part of the survey asked basic demographic questions including sex, ethnicity, level of education, and birth year. Next, respondents were asked to self-describe the area in which they live now, from “Very Rural” to “Very Urban.” “Suburban” was considered the midpoint of this scale. Self-identification should be an adequate measure of rurality since rurality is considered an important place-based identity. Rurality’s effect as a
subjective identification is more important for this survey than a definition of rurality based on nearness to the closest hospital, traffic flow, or level of agricultural activity. These types of measurements would, presumably, help more with objective measurements of rurality.

The next questions asked about ideology (very liberal to very conservative) and party identification. Party identification was further parsed out to see how strong this partisan attachment was. For example, Democrats were asked if they considered themselves a “Strong Democrat” or a “Not very Strong Democrat.” The same was asked of Republicans.

The next several questions asked whether the respondent had ever supported Bernie Sanders for President. Then, respondents were asked if they voted for Donald Trump or Joe Biden in the 2020 election. After a few more current event questions about Ukraine funding, diversity in America, and the 2024 election, it was time to measure political nostalgia.

I created an original battery of statements meant to measure political nostalgia. Some of these questions were obviously political in nature, but others less so. These statements were still meant to relate to jeremiads common in political discourse about the “downfall of America.” For example, the statement “Kids are more disrespectful than they used to be” is not necessarily a political statement, however it is often heard within discussions about policies that would restrict social media use or change the management structures of public schools in order to combat adolescent disrespect. These
statements were also meant to be statements that were likely repeated in prior generations, just as they are being lamented about now. This isn’t to say these statements have no vestiges of truth, but they are meant to be common refrains that have been repeated throughout history. For example, the idea that “people today are lazier than they used to be and don’t want to work anymore” is an idea that has been printed in American newspapers since at least 1894 (Nobody Wants to Work Anymore’ Is Not New. And It’s Not True 2023). ¹ ²

Respondents were asked to strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree or disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with the following statements:

1. I miss the way America was when I was younger.
2. America used to be a much stronger nation than it is now.

¹ For example, the following statement was written in an 1894 Kansas newspaper called the Rook County Record,

“With all the mines of the country shut down by strikers, what will the poor editor do for coal next winter? It is becoming apparent that nobody wants to work in these hard times.”

² Another good example was printed in The Binghamton Press in New York in 1916:

“What about vegetables? Hasn't it been a good year for vegetables?," the dealer was asked.

“Well, as near as I can find out," he answered, "the reason for food scarcity is that nobody wants to work as hard as they used to. I asked a man who was in here the other day, why he didn't raise more livestock and make his own butter."

"Women don't want to make butter anymore," he said, and then he asked: "Do you know where prices would go if we raised more calves and pigs, and made more butter? They would go way down."
3. It used to be so much easier to make a living when I was younger.
4. Today, politicians in America are much more corrupt than they used to be.
5. The quality of life in America has declined since I was younger.
6. I wish American music and movies were as good as they once were.
7. Kids today are much more disrespectful than they used to be.
8. I miss the days before cell phones and computers.
9. Today, people are much lazier than when I was younger.
10. Streets in America used to be much safer than they are now.
11. There are too many immigrants in America than there used to be.

Next, respondents were asked to evaluate a battery of statements meant to measure victimhood. These statements were first created and utilized in survey research by Armaly and Enders (2022). Respondents were asked to strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree or disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with the following statements:

1. I rarely get what I want in life.
2. Great things never come to me.
3. I usually have to settle for less.
4. I never seem to get an extra break.
5. The system works against people like me.
6. The world is out to get me.
7. The system is rigged to benefit a select few.

Next, respondents were asked to evaluate a battery of statements meant to measure RWA. These questions are original and were created by me by evaluating policies or ideas that are important to folks on the right wing and also require heavy government involvement. Respondents were asked to
strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree or disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with the following statements:

1. The government should have strong power to regulate bodily autonomy.
2. The government should have strong power to crack down on dangerous speech.
3. The government should have strong power to regulate the media.
4. The government should be allowed to use the military against its own citizens.

Respondents were then asked to evaluate original statements meant to measure LWA under the same theory the questions about RWA were created. These relate to policies important to the left-wing and also require heavy government control. Respondents were asked to strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree or disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with the following statements.

1. The government should be able to control corporations.
2. The government should be able to control Wall Street.
3. The government should be able to crack down on wacky religions.
4. The government should always place environmental interests over the economy.

Lastly, respondents were asked their zip code. This was originally done because I had planned on using the US Department of Agriculture’s Rural Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes to objectively identify what level of rurality a person’s home community could be described as. However, after collecting the data, it became apparent that many people who consider themselves to live in a rural area would not be considered to live in a rural
area when using RUCA codes. This is because RUCA codes are created using commuting flows, and many conventionally rural places still have high commuting flows and so are not considered rural under RUCA. However, because I am analyzing rurality as it relates to subjective social and political identities, I think self-described rurality is adequate for purposes of this thesis. Therefore, the zip code data was considered moot when doing the quantitative analysis of the collected data.

The entire dataset for the survey was fielded in one day. After discarding respondents who did not correctly answer attention check questions, there was a total of 647 respondents in the sample (n = 647). The entire question wording for this survey can be found in Appendix A.
CHAPTER IV
DATA AND RESULTS

This chapter will explore the results of the survey and the statistical tests that were performed before we ultimately discuss the implications. Bivariate and multivariate regression tests were used to determine political nostalgia’s relationship to rurality, victimhood, LWA, and RWA. I also explored the interaction effects between these variables with political nostalgia.

Before running the regression models, all measures were rescaled to range from 0 to 1. This allows the scales to be consistent and tables and graphs to be more intuitive. For example, rurality was scaled from 0-1, with 0 being very urban and 1 being very rural. Another example is that party identification was rescaled from 1-7 scale to a 0-1 scale, with 0 being strong Democrat and 1 being strong Republican. Sex was coded as “Female.” This means 0 for males and 1 for females.

It is important to calculate descriptive statistics for some of these characteristics because it gives us a better understanding of the sample dataset and it allows us to see how representative of the general population the sample is. A See Figures 1 through 5 for visual representations of the
important distributions. Figure 1 shows that sex is evenly distributed, with only slightly more females in the sample than males. Figure 2 shows the distribution of level of education attained. As the graph shows, most respondents have at least a high-school education and some level of college attainment, while no high-school diploma and a higher post-secondary degree is much rarer. This distribution closely resembles the national makeup of educational attainment. Figure 3 shows the distribution of ideology, from very liberal to very conservative. This variable is normally distributed, with most respondents clustered in the middle at a moderate ideology. Figure 4 shows the
distribution of party identification. This distribution shows that respondents are clustered at either Strong Democrat, Strong Republican, or Independent. I find this distribution interesting because even though most of the respondents are considered moderate in the distribution of ideology, most respondents still have strong partisan attachments.

Last and most important is the rurality distribution shown in Figure 5. This distribution shows that most respondents consider themselves to live in suburban areas. There are slightly fewer people who consider themselves in the rural designation than the urban designation. In retrospect, I regret including the suburban choice because a suburban area does not always mean it is a nice midpoint between rural and urban areas. Instead, I should have thought about leaving the suburban designation out and force people to put themselves in either the rural or urban fields. However, it is also true that many Americans live in suburban areas, and if I got rid of this designation, many respondents would have been forced to pick a choice they don’t fully agree with.
Next, I created political nostalgia scores for each respondent. This was done by rescaling the nostalgia questions in Likert form into a numeric value of 0-1: 0 being the least nostalgic (strongly disagreed with nostalgic statement) and 1 being the most nostalgic (strongly agreed with nostalgic statement). These nostalgia scores for each question were then added up and an average was calculated. The nostalgia scores for the entire dataset are shown in Figure 6 as a box and whisker plot and in Figure 7 as a histogram. Figure 6 demonstrates that the median nostalgia score is 0.7 and that the upper and lower quartiles are close to the median with the minimum nostalgia score (0) being much farther away than the maximum nostalgia score (1.0). This distribution is further visualized in Figure 7 which shows a left-skewed distribution. These results indicate high political nostalgia scores for the entire dataset.

After calculating the nostalgia scores, I examined the reliability of my nostalgia scale by computing the Cronbach’s alpha score. If the Cronbach’s alpha score is too low, then this means that the statements were either
confusing or elicited inconsistent answers from the respondents. The Cronbach’s alpha for this dataset was 0.898. This is considered a very good score and so there is no reason to worry about the internal consistency of the battery of nostalgia questions.

I repeated these same procedures for victimhood, RWA, and LWA. The distribution of victimhood scores can be seen in Figure 8. The victimhood scores are distributed fairly normally, meaning that the respondents are bunched around an average amount of feelings of victimhood with some of the respondents feeling very victimized or not at all. Figure 9 shows the distribution of RWA scores for the respondents. Most of the respondents are clustered on the lower end of RWA with a skew towards high
RWA scores. Lastly, Figure 10 shows the distribution of LWA scores. This curve indicates a standard bell curve that indicates most respondents have an average amount of LWA, with smaller amounts of respondents having high and low LWA scores.

*Scatterplots of Various Independent Variables’ Relationship with Nostalgia Figures 11-18*

Cronbach’s alpha scores were then calculated for victimhood, RWA, and LWA. The score for victimhood was 0.89 and the scores for RWA and LWA were
both 0.79. These are also high scores and indicate good internal consistency with those respective batteries of statements.

Next, I calculated correlation coefficients and ran several bivariate regression models to determine the relationships between nostalgia and the other variables and whether these relationships were significant or not. These models are shown numerically in Table 1.

The correlation coefficient between rurality and nostalgia was 0.106 and is statistically significant with p<0.001. This is a quite low correlation coefficient, but it does show a positive statistically significant relationship. The fitted scatter plot for this relationship is visualized in Figure 11. Figure 11 shows a weak slope and visualizes the fact that most people are suburban in this sample. Model 1 in Table 1 is a regression model between self-described (SD) rurality and nostalgia. The regression coefficient is 0.079 and is statistically significant at p<0.01. This means that the movement from the minimum to the maximum of rurality corresponds to a 0.079 unit increase in nostalgia. This is a very small regression coefficient, so this means that the relationship is not very strong. However, it is positive, as expected.

The correlation coefficient between Party ID and nostalgia was 0.40. This is statistically significant with a p<0.01. This is a moderately high positive correlation value. This relationship is visualized in a fitted scatterplot in Figure 12. Figure 12 makes clear that as respondents’ Party ID becomes more Republican so does political nostalgia. Model 2 is the bivariate regression
model of the relationship between party ID and political nostalgia. This relationship is positive (towards Republicans) and statistically significant with a coefficient of 0.216 and a p-value < 0.001. This is much stronger than the rurality relationship, however it is still a moderately low coefficient which indicates that there are still many other things that influence political nostalgia that need to be teased out.

The correlation coefficient between ideology and nostalgia was 0.36 with a p<0.01. This is statistically significant. This is also a moderately low positive correlation value and is visualized as a scatterplot in Figure 13. The more conservative the respondent, generally the more political nostalgia they have. The regression coefficient between ideology and nostalgia was 0.250. This is statistically significant with a p-value < 0.001.

The correlation coefficient between victimhood and nostalgia was 0.37 with a p<0.01. That is statistically significant. Again, this is a moderately high positive correlation value. The scatterplot for victimhood is visualized in Figure 14. Model 4 calculated the regression between political nostalgia and victimhood. The regression coefficient for this relationship is 0.344 and is also statistically significant with a p-value < 0.001. This is the strongest relationship of all the bivariate models. I suspect that victimhood and nostalgia do not directly influence each other, rather there is some other psychological and/or political phenomenon that informs both victimhood and nostalgia.
The correlation coefficient between RWA and nostalgia was 0.32. This is statistically significant with a p<0.01. This is a moderately weak relationship that is visualized as a scatterplot in Figure 15. The scatterplot indicates that there are still many respondents with high levels of nostalgia, but low levels of RWA; however, there are very few individuals high in RWA that are low in measured nostalgia. This leads to the conclusion that RWA is more highly correlated with not having low levels of nostalgia as opposed to RWA being correlated with high levels of nostalgia. The regression coefficient for this relationship was calculated in Model 5 and is 0.254, which is also statistically significant with a p-value < 0.001.

The correlation coefficient between nostalgia and LWA was only 0.03. This is an extremely low correlation value and demonstrates essentially no correlation. The p-value is 0.346 which is not statistically significant. This relationship is shown in Figure 16 as a scatterplot. The regression coefficient was calculated in Model 6. This coefficient is almost non-existent and is not statistically significant with a high p-value. This indicates that LWA and political nostalgia do not have any sort of bivariate relationship with each other.

The correlation coefficient between voting for Trump in 2020 and nostalgia is 0.45. This relationship is statistically significant with p<0.01. This is a moderately high correlation coefficient. The scatterplot of this relationship is shown in Figure 17. As you can tell, respondents who voted for Trump
generally have much higher nostalgia scores. Model 7 is the regression model between voting for Trump in 2020 and nostalgia. The regression coefficient is 0.180 and is statistically significant with a p-value < 0.001. This positive coefficient is not surprising given nostalgia’s relationship with Republican Party ID and conservative ideology.

The correlation coefficient between birth year and nostalgia was -0.11. This is statistically significant with p<0.01. This is also a negative relationship meaning lower ages are associated with lower levels of political nostalgia. This relationship is shown in Figure 18 as a scatterplot. Figure 18 shows that there is a slight dip in political nostalgia starting around the year 1980, before then, political nostalgia stays steady. Model 8 is the bivariate model showing the relationship between birth year and political nostalgia. The regression coefficient is very weak (-0.001), but it is also statistically significant with p<0.01. It is also negative as to be expected. This indicates that as age decreases, political nostalgia decreases. This makes sense when considering

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
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Table 1
younger people should have fewer memories of the past to be nostalgic for in the first place.

In Model 9, I ran a multivariate regression by including SD rurality, partisanship, ideology, victimhood, RWA, LWA, Trump voter in 2020, birth year, and sex as the independent variables. Model 9 erased the statistical significance of rurality and the 2020 Trump vote. The other positive regression coefficients from the bivariate models (partisanship, ideology, and victimhood) stayed relatively the same and statistically significant; interestingly, RWA’s regression coefficient increased, and the regression coefficient for LWA became statistically significant. This demonstrates strong nostalgic attachments among those high in RWA and that those two measurements share an undefined common influence. It also demonstrates that LWA can have a statistically significant negative relationship with political nostalgia when other independent variables are controlled for. The result of this multivariate model finds support for H2 (nostalgia has a positive relationship with conservative/Republican), H3 (nostalgia has a positive relationship with victimhood), and H5 (nostalgia has a positive relationship with RWA), but it finds a lack of support for H1 (nostalgia has a positive relationship with rurality) and H4 (nostalgia has a positive relationship with LWA).
Next, I explored the effect of rurality on nostalgia, conditional on some of the political and psychological factors I’ve identified. Though I do not have hypotheses about these effects, I thought it was important to explore interactions between variables that seem to be strongly correlated with nostalgia and rurality. These models are shown in Table 2. Model 10 accounts for interaction effects on political nostalgia between SD rurality and party ID. Model 11 accounts for interaction effects on political nostalgia between SD rurality and RWA. Model 12 accounts for interaction effects on political nostalgia between SD rurality and victimhood. Lastly, Model 13 accounts for interaction effects on political nostalgia between SD rurality and ideology. Because interaction model coefficients are famously hard to draw inferences from, these interaction models are illustrated in Figures 19 to 22. The shaded
area around the lines indicates a 95% confidence interval, meaning that if the shaded lines overlap the y-axis, the result is not significant because it cannot be differentiated from an effect of 0. This is important because all of the interaction graphs show that the regression line overlaps 0. This means that the effect of rurality on these independent variables does not change for different levels of other independent variables.

Interactions Effects between Independent Variables on Nostalgia
  Figures 19 to 22

Using the multivariate model results, I also created graphs showing predicted levels of political nostalgia based on the level of a respective independent variable. These predicted levels of nostalgia are visualized in
Figures 23-29 with a 95% confidence interval shading. These figures demonstrate the major findings of this survey. Namely, whether the relationship with nostalgia is positive or negative, and the fact that rurality does not have a strong relationship with nostalgia, and thus, is not a strong predictor of how much political nostalgia a person harbors. Figure 22 shows that as rurality increases, the predicted level of nostalgia stays almost constant. This demonstrates that urban individuals have just as high levels of nostalgia as their rural counterparts. It also appears that victimhood, LWA, and RWA have the strongest effects on predicted nostalgia based on the length of the intervals in Figures 26, 27, and 28. For example, in Figure 27, the predicted nostalgia for RWA goes from 0.6 at the minimum level to 0.86 at the maximum level. This again tells us that most people are above the midpoint in nostalgia no matter what. This finding was previously demonstrated in the box and whisker plot (Figure 6) and the histogram (Figure 7). Although LWA had weak correlation and regression coefficients, the multivariate results were enough to show a considerable effect on nostalgia in F29.
Predicted Nostalgia Levels of Independent Variables
Figures 23 to 29

F23

F24

F25

F26

F27

F28

F29
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The results of this survey lead to several key takeaways. First, Americans are highly nostalgic people. Political nostalgia is not just high among rural people, but urban dwellers too; not just for Republicans, but Democrats too; and not just the old, but the young too. Nostalgia, as measured, may also be high among the respondents due to my selection of statements in the nostalgia instrument. However, further testing of other statements to compare to is needed to know for sure. I intentionally included statements that were not blatantly political in order to “sneak in the back door” of the respondents’ politically nostalgic attitudes. This effort to try to subtly measure political nostalgia likely led to personal nostalgia entering the mix as well. This may also be due to the conflation between personal nostalgia and political nostalgia. Individuals are more likely to be politically nostalgic for the past because they are also personally nostalgic for it. In a future study, it would make sense to measure personal nostalgia and political nostalgia and compare the two to see if there is a difference and to make sure the two types of nostalgia do not get confused with one another.
Despite the methodology choices that may have impacted the results, the fact remains that nostalgia is a formidable emotion in the American psyche. This means that nostalgia has the ability to be harnessed by politicians and other political elites from all political stripes. While some may be more successful in harnessing this nostalgia than others, due to their respective involvement with more nostalgically minded groups, it cannot be denied that American’s highly nostalgic sentiments have implications for political communications and the type of future they want to live in—paradoxically, the past.

Hypothesis 1 was the focus of this thesis. I hypothesized that the more rural an individual is, the more likely they are to display higher levels of political nostalgia. The results of the bivariate model indicated a statistically significant and positive, albeit weak, relationship between nostalgia and rurality. This means that the relationship is in the right direction, however, the relationship is not strong enough to make any major conclusions. Therefore, the hypothesis finds limited support, since the magnitude of difference in nostalgia is not as strong as I had believed it was going to be. Furthermore, when other independent variables are controlled for, the relationship between rurality and nostalgia cannot be distinguished from 0—meaning, the effect of rurality cannot be differentiated from having no effect at all. These results do not mean there is no relationship between rurality and nostalgia; rather, in America, rurality is so tightly correlated with
partisanship and other factors that any of its effects are diminished when controlling for such factors. Rural and urban Americans both do ‘nostalgize’, but the levels are greatly informed by their political leanings and other psychological factors.

Hypothesis 2 found support, as it has in other studies. This indicates that my nostalgia instrument in the survey is a valid measurement of nostalgia. The more Republican or conservative an individual is, the more likely they are to have higher levels of political nostalgia. Republicans and conservatives are much more oriented towards attitudes of tradition and less diversity in America, and so it makes sense that they would nostalgize for a time that they perceive to be more aligned with these attitudes.

That is not to say that Democrats and liberals are not highly nostalgic—they are. This is demonstrated by the predicted level of nostalgia among very strong Democrats and very liberal respondents being greater than the midpoint of nostalgia scores. However, Democrats and liberals are not as nostalgic as their partisan and ideological counterparts. This discrepancy makes sense when considering the basic tenets of progressivism and conservatism. Progressives tend to support change and direct our sight to the future, while traditional conservatism’s entire point is to preserve the perceived good things of the past and present through a sense of traditionalism to fight against changes in the status quo. These basic philosophies place different emphases on the past, so it makes sense that
conservatives and Republicans would be more nostalgic for the past than Democrats and liberals. While these findings may seem obvious, I believe the most important finding is that many Democrats and liberals are also highly nostalgic, just at slightly lower levels. Once again, this indicates that political nostalgia has the potential to be harnessed by political elites of all partisan and ideological persuasions.

The results also supported Hypothesis 3. Victimhood had a fairly high correlation coefficient, bivariate regression coefficient, and multivariate regression coefficient. There demonstrates a moderately positive relationship between victimhood and nostalgia. Individuals who feel victimized today are likely comparing it to a time they did not feel victimized. This leads to nostalgia for their personal past as well as the associated collective and political pasts. This relationship may also be indirect as well. Nostalgia and victimhood may share a key unstudied psychological trait that informs both of those variables. This finding is important because it demonstrates that victimized Americans are more likely to be affected by nostalgic political messaging than those who do not see themselves as victims. One can see how a messaging blend of victimization and nostalgia can lead to political narratives that rely heavily on scapegoating and a need to reinstate a particular envisioned past where today’s “victims” were once considered the “strong, virtuous” ones. After these results, a much more robust study and
literature review are needed on the relationship between victimhood and nostalgia.

Hypothesis 4 theorized that LWA and political nostalgia were also positively correlated. This was based on the idea that left-wing individuals have political nostalgia for a perceived American past more devoted to civil rights, workers’ rights, corporation control, and abortion rights; therefore, they would support heavy government/authoritarian control in order to accomplish these goals. The results indicated something else. LWA’s correlation coefficient and bivariate coefficient indicated that the relationship was weak and statistically insignificant. However, the multivariate model showed that the relationship became statistically significant, and the negative coefficient increased. Figure 29 even shows that LWA had a considerable effect on political nostalgia. These mixed signals indicate that the relationship is not very robust. It also shows that the relationship has a negative correlation, not a positive one as expected. One explanation for this is that the left-wing doesn’t actually have nostalgia for the past because they don’t actually envision that the US was once more devoted to the forementioned goals. For example, two reasonable people could make the argument that America was or was not devoted more to civil rights in the 1960s and 1970s than they are now. If more left-wing individuals have the framing that it was less devoted to civil rights in the past, then there may be less political nostalgia for that time.
In retrospect, I also believe I may not have been strong enough in my wording of statements meant to measure LWA as I was in my wording of the RWA questions. Due to this, many respondents were measured to be moderately disposed to LWA. This likely affected the regression models between LWA and nostalgia and the true relationship was not actually discovered.

Last was Hypothesis 4, which theorized a positive correlation between RWA and political nostalgia. The results found support for this hypothesis. In the multivariate model, RWA had the highest coefficient of any of the independent variables. Based on prior research on the relationship between right-wing populism and political nostalgia, it comes as no surprise that RWAs are more apt to nostalgize about America’s political past. RWA stresses the importance of tradition, much more than traditional conservatism, so it makes sense that RWAs would have their attentions more squarely pointed towards the past. This result, like the results surrounding victimhood, indicate to political elites which groups of people are much more responsive to nostalgic rhetoric. Individuals high in RWA and victimhood are individuals whose ears are much more responsive to tales of the “glory days.” These results are important because they squarely place which groups of people are most nostalgic for America’s past, and they show what indicators one may need to pay attention to if monitoring the rise of RWAs in America.
Conclusion

I did not find unequivocal support for my theory about the rural-urban underpinnings of political nostalgia. However, I do conclude with some other new and important findings. First, Americans are generally a highly nostalgic people. This means that the indelible and subjective impressions of memories, personal and collective, are just as important in forming current political attitudes as the current political climate. Second, the exploratory studies into nostalgia’s relationship with victimhood and RWA indicate that certain concoctions of political attitudes share more potent relationships with nostalgia than other variables. Future studies are needed to parse out this relationship.

There are a few things I would change if I did this study again. For one, I would separate the measurements of political and personal nostalgia instead of melding them into one measurement. This would allow me to figure out if the two types of nostalgia operate distinctly from one another or if they truly do inform each other in their relationships with other variables. This would answer the question of whether personal nostalgia is coloring American’s perceptions of the political past or not. Future areas of study include coming up with better ways to measure subjective rurality (or whether objective rurality is more desirable) and comparing levels of nostalgia among different ethnicities and races.
Nostalgia’s ability to create powerful narratives makes it one of the most effective political tools there is. Americans will always look to the past because it informs us of who we are today. And this nostalgia can either create bitterness for the present or build optimism for the future. Merle Haggard (1981) finally realized this second option in his famous country jeremiad when he sang:

“Cause the best of the free life is still yet to come
And the good times ain't over for good”
REFERENCES


Garasky, S. *Where are they going? A comparison of urban and rural youths’ locational choices after leaving the parental home.* Social Science Research, 31(3), 409-431. 2002.


APPENDIX A

Survey Questions

1. How many US states are there?
   a. 45
   b. 35
   c. 50
   d. 55

2. What is your sex?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Other

3. Please specify your ethnicity.
   a. White
   b. Hispanic or Latino
   c. Black or African American
   d. Native American or American Indian
   e. Asian / Pacific Islander
   f. Other

4. What is your level of education?
   a. Some high school, no diploma
   b. High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)
   c. Some college credit, no degree
   d. Trade/technical/vocational training
   e. Associate degree
   f. Bachelor’s degree
   g. Master’s degree
   h. Professional degree

5. What year were you born?
   _____
6. How would you describe the area in which you live now?
   1. Very rural
   2. Rural
   3. Slightly Rural
   4. Suburban
   5. Slightly Urban
   6. Urban
   7. Very Urban

7. We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. When it comes to politics, how do you think of yourself?
   1. Very Liberal
   2. Liberal
   3. Slightly Liberal
   4. Moderate
   5. Slightly Conservative
   6. Conservative
   7. Very Conservative
   8. Haven’t thought much about this
   9. Don’t know

8. Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, a Democrat, an Independent, or what?
   1. Democrat
   2. Republican
   3. Independent
   4. Other
   5. No preference, either
   6. Don’t know

9. Would you call yourself a strong Democrat or a not-very-strong Democrat?
   a. Strong
   b. Not very strong
   c. Don’t know

10. Would you call yourself a strong Republican or a not-very-strong Republican?
   a. Strong
   b. Not very strong
c. Don’t know

11. Do you think of yourself as closer to the Republican or Democratic party?
   a. Republican party
   b. Democratic party
   c. Neither
   d. Don’t know

12. Did you vote in 2020?
   a. Yes
   b. No

13. Who did you vote for?
   a. Joe Biden
   b. Donald Trump

14. Have you ever supported Bernie Sanders for president?
   a. Yes
   b. No

15. State whether you strongly agree, agree, neither or agree or disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree with the following statements.
   a. It is important that I vote for a President in 2024 who cares about restoring America to its former level of power and respect.
   b. America is becoming too diverse.
   c. The US is giving too much aid to Ukraine.

16. Please state whether you strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree or disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with the following statements.
   a. I miss the way America was when I was younger.
   b. America used to be a much stronger nation than it is now.
   c. It used to be so much easier to make a living when I was younger.
   d. Today, politicians in America are much more corrupt than they used to be.
   e. The quality of life in America has declined since I was younger.
   f. I wish American music and movies were as good as they once were.
   g. Kids today are much more disrespectful than they used to be.
   h. I miss the days before cell phones and computers.
   i. Today, people are much lazier than when I was younger.
j. Streets in America used to be much safer than they are now.
k. There are too many immigrants in America than there used to be.

17. Please state whether you strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with the following statements.
   a. I rarely get what I want in life.
   b. Great things never come to me.
   c. I usually have to settle for less.
   d. I never seem to get an extra break.
   e. The system works against people like me.
   f. The world is out to get me.
   g. The system is rigged to benefit a select few.

18. Please state whether you strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with the following statements.
   a. The government should have strong power to regulate bodily autonomy.
   b. The government should have strong power to crack down on dangerous speech.
   c. The government should have strong power to regulate the media.
   d. The government should be allowed to use the military against its own citizens.

19. Please state whether you strongly disagree, somewhat disagree, somewhat agree, or strongly agree with the following statements.
   a. The government should be able to control corporations.
   b. The government should be able to control Wall Street.
   c. The government should be able to crack down on wacky religions.
   d. The government should always place environmental interests over the economy.

20. What is your zip code? (Reminder: the research team will strictly safeguard confidentiality of all information obtained during this study.

    _____
APPENDIX B

Comparison of Demographic Statistics to the 2020 Census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2020 Census</th>
<th>Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Median – 39.0</td>
<td>Median – 46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Male – 49.1%</td>
<td>Male - 47.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female – 50.1%</td>
<td>Female – 52.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Some High School – 9%</td>
<td>Some High School – 5.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High School – 28%</td>
<td>High School – 25.35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Some College – 15%</td>
<td>Some College – 20.56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Associate Degree – 10%</td>
<td>Associate Degree – 12.67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelors Degree – 23%</td>
<td>Bachelors Degree – 22.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Advanced Degree – 14%</td>
<td>Advanced Degree – 9.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race*</td>
<td>Asian – 6.3%</td>
<td>Asian – 5.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Black – 13.6%</td>
<td>Black – 13.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hispanic – 19.1%</td>
<td>Hispanic – 10.97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White – 75.5%</td>
<td>White – 73.10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Native American – 1.3%</td>
<td>Native American – 2.94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Race percentages add up to more than 100% because respondents were asked to pick all races that apply to them.
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