

DAIRY VETERINARY NEWSLETTER

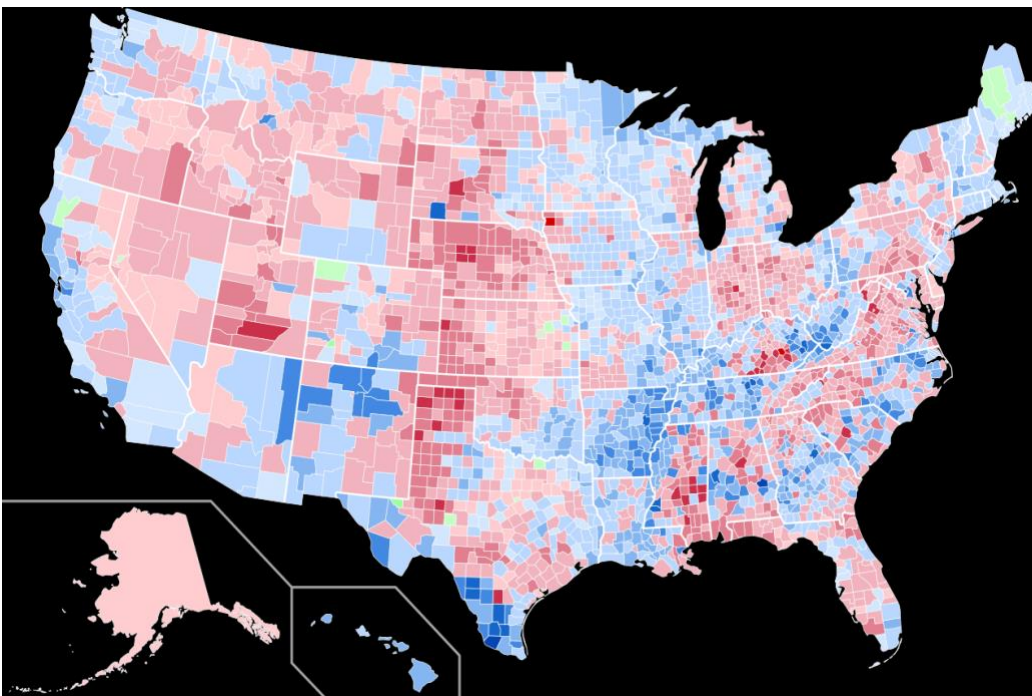
January 2021

Is the Rural-Urban Political Divide Larger than Ever? Does it Matter to the Dairy Industry?

After seeing some interesting information regarding the results of the recent presidential election in less populated and rural areas compared with more populated urban and suburban areas, I was unsure whether to comment on it in this newsletter. However, multiple dairy popular press outlets have presented some data on it, so I decided to. As always, the information in this newsletter is not intended to be in support of one political party or viewpoint versus others. The main question being posed is whether the political divide between rural and urban communities in the U.S. is as large as it seems, and how that might or might not affect the dairy industry and thus also dairy veterinarians.

Some polls shortly before the November 2020 election showed that of decided farm voters (not only dairy farmers, and it was not clear how “farmer” was defined or validated), 88% favored the incumbent presidential candidate who eventually lost versus 12% favoring the challenger from the other major political party.

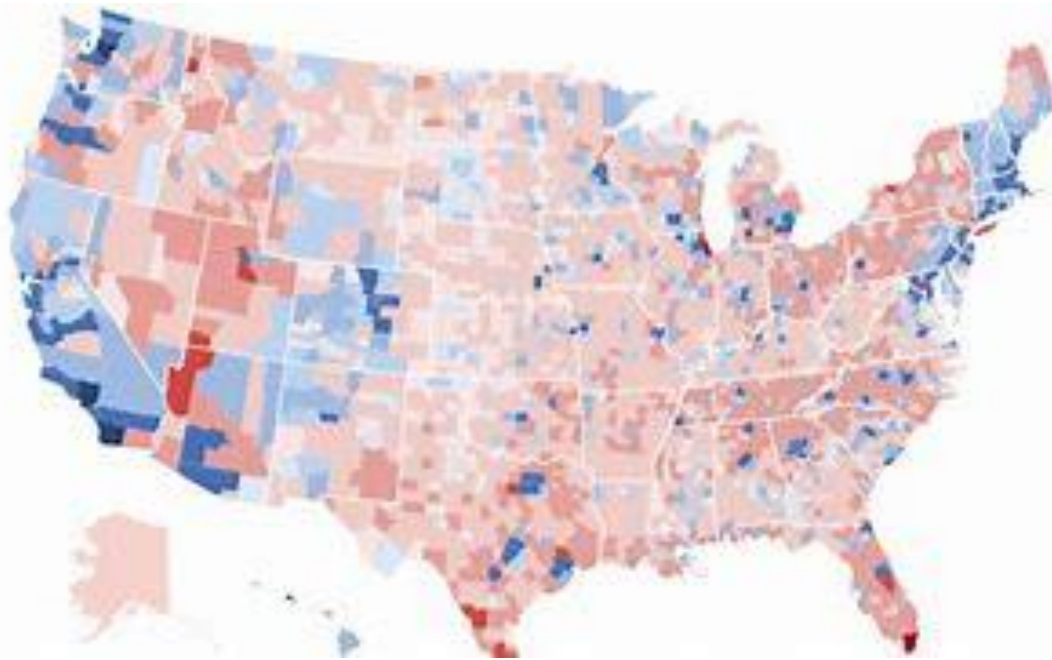
After the election, Dairy Herd Management, January 2021 showed how the 6 largest dairy states voted: California, Wisconsin, New York, Pennsylvania for the challenging candidate (114 electoral votes), Idaho and Texas for the incumbent candidate (42 votes). But what about the votes in less populated areas and rural areas as opposed to more urban centers? First, below is the 1992 presidential election votes by county map:



1992 Presidential County Vote Map (Blue = Clinton, Red = Bush)

The 1992 map on the previous page shows that in many states, quite a few counties including in less populous areas voted for the Democratic candidate Bill Clinton, who defeated George (H. W.) Bush the Republican incumbent. (One can look up the 1996 map, not shown here. It shows that many states went very blue in counties across the state for Clinton, while some others went very red in counties across those states for Dole. There was more agreement within more states, with more dramatic disagreement between more states in 1996 than I perceived at that time.) Nevertheless, the Democratic incumbent Clinton expanded his support in many less populous areas in 1996. Few states showed a strong rural-urban divide in the voting for president in 1996.

Below is the 2020 presidential election votes by county map:



2020 Presidential County Vote Map (Blue = Democrat, Red = Republican)

This map appears to be shaded more by *number* of votes than percentage of votes in counties. However, it can readily be seen that many less populated and rural areas voted for the incumbent, while major population centers voted for the challenger, the winner of the election. I looked through reports of all counties in the U.S. to see the percentage of votes for each presidential candidate. Many rural areas across the U.S. voted between 60% to 75% in favor of the incumbent candidate, and in some states, primarily in the West and Southeast, there were rural counties voting 80% to 87% in favor of the incumbent. In contrast, most large population centers voted between 60% to 75% in favor of the challenger; some large counties voted 80% or more in favor of the challenger. At least in terms of presidential politics, there does indeed appear to be a rural-urban divide.

Are consumers more separated from those who grow food than ever?

When I was growing up in Wisconsin, I had several great aunts and uncles who were farmers, including two families in dairy farming. My school made trips each year during the first few years of grade school to the University of Wisconsin milking parlor in Madison. Behind clear glass, the head to tail milking parlor with water drop hoses, paper towel teat cleaning, no teat dip, and the milkers all wearing white uniforms with white caps enthralled us with cows being milked. One of my great aunts milked with suspended buckets with surcingles and I was amazed that not everyone milked by lifting milk to a highline pipeline, which was then the “modern” way. (I just looked online, and suspended bucket surcingle straps can still be purchased.)

When I was in my first year after graduation from vet school, I joined a committee that planned an annual event at the county fairgrounds that took place every March. It involved information, contests, some entertainment, agricultural implement exhibits, and was designed to educate livestock producers as well as to be an event for non-farm people to attend, and many did. I discovered that several people on that committee as well as some of my dairy producer clients thought that “city people” knew nothing about where their food comes from. I told them about my background and that of the vast majority of my vet school classmates, that we were from cities or suburbia but we did indeed know something growing up about livestock, farming, etc. and that it was definitely hard work. My opinion was that they were not crediting city people with enough understanding of farming.

Today, it seems that with another one or two generations removed from that time, indeed many people have no family connection and little to no exposure to farming as they grow up. Is the rural-urban divide, and the increased political polarization between many people in those two types of communities, hurting the political cause of agriculture including dairy producers more than it used to? First, what about approval of farming?

Image and approval of farming is the highest of any profession or industry

There is a huge volume of opinion in popular and dairy industry press suggesting that more of the public does not approve of dairy farming practices, some suggesting a marked loss in public approval, but this is not borne out by the recent “Americans' Views of U.S. Business and Industry Sectors, 2020” report, a Gallup Poll published during September 2020. In fact, the image of farming, grocery, and restaurant industries has risen during the pandemic and farming is now the number 1 ranked profession or industry.

Here are some of the highest and lowest ranked industries:

Farming and agriculture	69% approval, 19% neutral
Grocery industry	63% approval, 24% neutral
Restaurant industry	61% approval, 24% neutral
Legal field	34% approval, 38% neutral
Pharmaceutical industry	34% approval, 49% negative
Sports industry	30% approval, 40% negative (described as plummeting during the pandemic)
Federal government	30% approval, 50% negative

Of course one vital thing that supports all those who raise and produce food is that 100% of people have to eat, and they prefer to do it multiple times each day. While many formerly highly regarded professions have declined from much higher support over the last 25 years or so, food industries have gained stature during the pandemic.

Historically, veterinary medicine has been a profession highly regarded and trusted by the public. However, I can find no recent surveys where veterinary medicine is included anymore. If any of our readers are aware of any recent surveys or other data on public approval of veterinary medicine, please let me know.

Values important to people across U.S. culture, and within agriculture

Here are values found important across U.S. culture in a June, 2020 report:

Independence
Equality
Informality (continued on the next page)

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Directness
Competition
Efficiency

It is harder to find a list of values important specifically to rural/farming people. However, here is a list of personality traits from a 2018 survey of farmers:

Patient
Curious/Investigative
Conscientious/Strong Work Ethic
Competitive
Risk Taking

It seems, and agrees with the vast majority of my experience working with dairy producers for many years, that many of the values of people on farms and within the dairy industry are not so different from those across most of our U.S. society. It is also very encouraging to see that farming and food industries have risen to be the most highly regarded professions during the current pandemic. Presidential and/or political party affiliations may differ, but not fundamental values. Political and moral support for farming remains strong.

I hope you had a good Holiday Season and are having a good start to 2021. Please let us know your comments and suggestions for future topics. I can be reached at (435) 760-3731 (Cell), or David.Wilson@usu.edu.



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