

# GATEWAY AND NATURAL AMENITY REGION NETWORK

September 30, 2020 Research Q&A Session  
Findings From the Rural West COVID Project



GATEWAY AND  
NATURAL AMENITY  
REGION INITIATIVE

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## OVERVIEW

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted life for millions of people across the United States. Yet, there is a lack of rapid and reliable information about the scope of its impact and potential solutions in underserved areas such as the rural U.S. West. Current information relies on national surveys or focuses on urban regions with greater institutional resources, rather than tailored specifically to the unique needs of rural communities. With this survey, the Rural West Covid Project aimed to close that gap and inform public policy across various levels of government to meet the needs of rural communities struggling with the social and economic impacts of the pandemic.

Dr. Mueller presented early results that show the impacts of COVID-19 on rural populations in the West have been severe, with significant reported impacts to employment, overall life satisfaction, mental health, and economic outlook. They further found these impacts have been generally consistent across age, ethnicity, education, and gender.

See full results at [covidruralwest.org](https://covidruralwest.org).

You can [view the full session](#) on the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism's YouTube Channel

### ABOUT THE GNAR INITIATIVE

[The GNAR Initiative](#) leverages research, education, and capacity building to assist communities, land managers, and others in gateway and natural amenity regions throughout the West in preparing for and responding to planning, development, natural resource management, and public policy challenges, such as the current COVID-19 pandemic. The Initiative is an affiliation of university faculty, government and state agencies, non-profit organizations, and community leaders. It is based in the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism at Utah State University.



## PRESENTED BY J. TOM MUELLER

### ABOUT THE PRESENTER:

J. Tom Mueller is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and holds a PhD in Rural Sociology and Human Dimensions of Natural Resources and the Environment from Penn State. As a rural sociologist and demographer, his research program focuses on rural populations, well-being, and natural resource development. Using a variety of quantitative methods, his research focuses on understanding why some places are persistently worse off than others, and what needs to be done to remedy these inequalities. In addressing these spatial inequalities, the majority of Tom's work is on the economic and health-related dimensions of well-being among rural residents of the United States.



## SUMMARY

The Rural West COVID Project seeks to help build a more complete picture of COVID-19 in the United States. Most research is currently happening on a national scale or in urban settings, however rural communities are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic, and recovery plans should incorporate rural specific data.

There are three components to the project: an initial survey, qualitative studies of 25 rural counties, and a followup survey. The initial survey had 1,009 responses spread across the entire Western US (see Image A). Because the focus of this project is rural broadly, not all counties included fall into a gateway or natural amenity region (GNAR) category, however most GNAR counties are classified as rural therefore the data can still be relevant.

### INSIGHTS FROM THE INITIAL SURVEY RESULTS:

- 1/3 of rural westerners have had a direct experience with COVID-19
- Of those employed full-time in the year prior to the pandemic, 21% were not at time of survey
  - Of this 21%...
    - 50% were temporarily unemployed
    - 28% had gone part-time
- Of those who were part-time pre-pandemic, 41% were not by time of survey
  - Of this 41%...
    - 73% were temporarily unemployed
    - 3% were now full-time

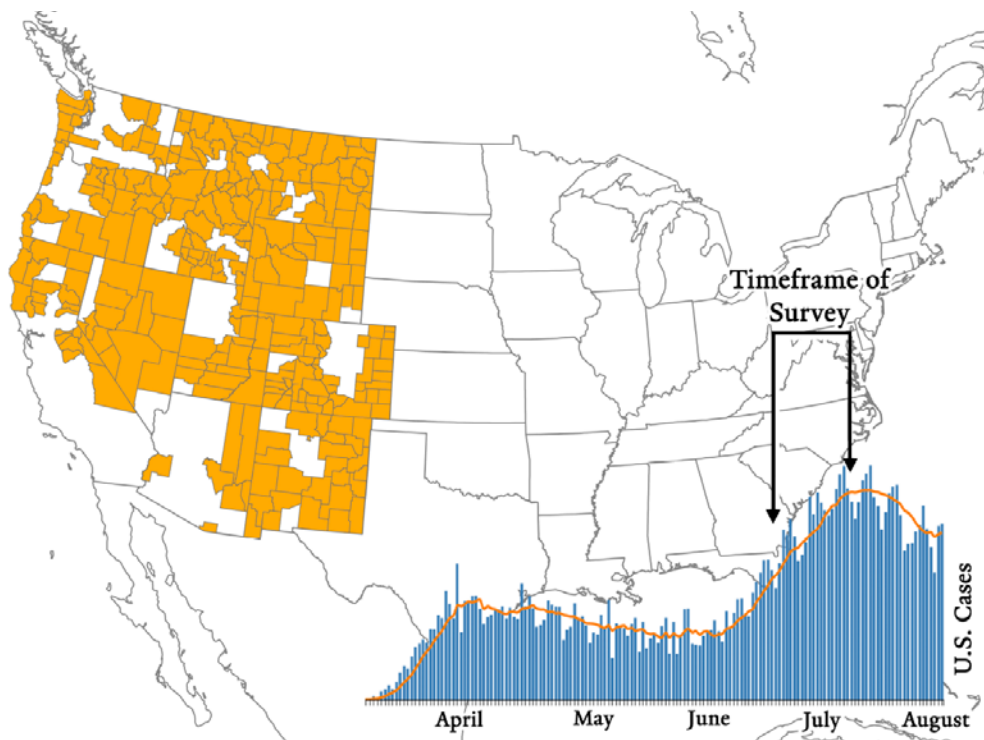


IMAGE A - Rural Counties Surveyed & Survey Timeframe

## SUMMARY - CONT.

### INSIGHTS FROM THE INITIAL SURVEY RESULTS (CONTINUED):

- Of households that have children under 16 years old, 18% did not have access to household high-speed internet
- Among those who were uninsured pre-pandemic, 27% gained health insurance coverage by the time of our survey
- Use of credit and savings increased and decreased at a similar level as a result of the pandemic. Around 20% reported increases, 20% reported decreases, 52% reported no change, and 7% reported they did not have access to credit or savings.
- Attitudes about local forms of natural resource development do not appear to be impacted by the pandemic.
- Views on various issues (e.g. renewables, oil and gas, and tourism) remained constant whether they reported that their lives were negatively impacted by the pandemic or not.
- Only four types of natural resource development received majority support from rural Westerners
  - Farming and ranching (81%) was strongest, followed by solar (67%), wind (59%), and tourism (57%).
- Weakest support was expressed for logging (41%), mining (35%), and oil and gas (40%).

Overall, The Rural West Covid Project has found that Covid-19 has had a significant impact on residents of the rural west. These impacts are broadly shared across age, sex, ethnicity, and education. Although there are some specific differences, the real story is shared experience. Since the time of the initial survey, the extension of unemployment benefits has expired, so things may have gotten harder in the rural West. Incomplete internet coverage is a serious problem. With increased online education, this disparity is likely impacting already vulnerable families. That said, many people are optimistic about the future.



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# APPENDIX A - PRESENTATION SLIDES

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# The Impacts of Covid-19 on the Rural American West

Presentation to the GNAR Initiative

September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020

J. Tom Mueller,  
Katie McConnell, Paul Berne Burow, Katie Pofahl, Alexis Merdjanoff,  
Justin Farrell

# Who we are

- A multi-university team interested in the well-being of rural Americans
  - Utah State University
  - Yale University
  - New York University
- Inter-disciplinary team of...
  - Sociologists
  - Anthropologist
  - Public Health Researcher
- Living in...
  - Logan, UT
  - Boise, ID
  - Denver, CO
  - Reno, NM
  - New York City
  - New Haven, CT



# What is the Rural West Covid Project?

- The Rural West Covid Project is an effort to complete the picture of Covid-19 in the United States
- Vast majority of existing work is either national or urban in scope
- However, rural communities are particularly vulnerable to effects of the pandemic
  - Less access to healthcare
  - Higher portion of health-comprised individuals
  - Elevated poverty
  - More vulnerable, often seasonal, labor markets

# What is the Rural West Covid Project?

- If we design recovery plans relying on data biased towards urban populations, we are likely to miss the mark
- A major reason for the existing bias is simply a lack of data
- It is imperative that we collect information on rural impacts so we can ensure recovery efforts reflect *all* Americans

# Project Overview

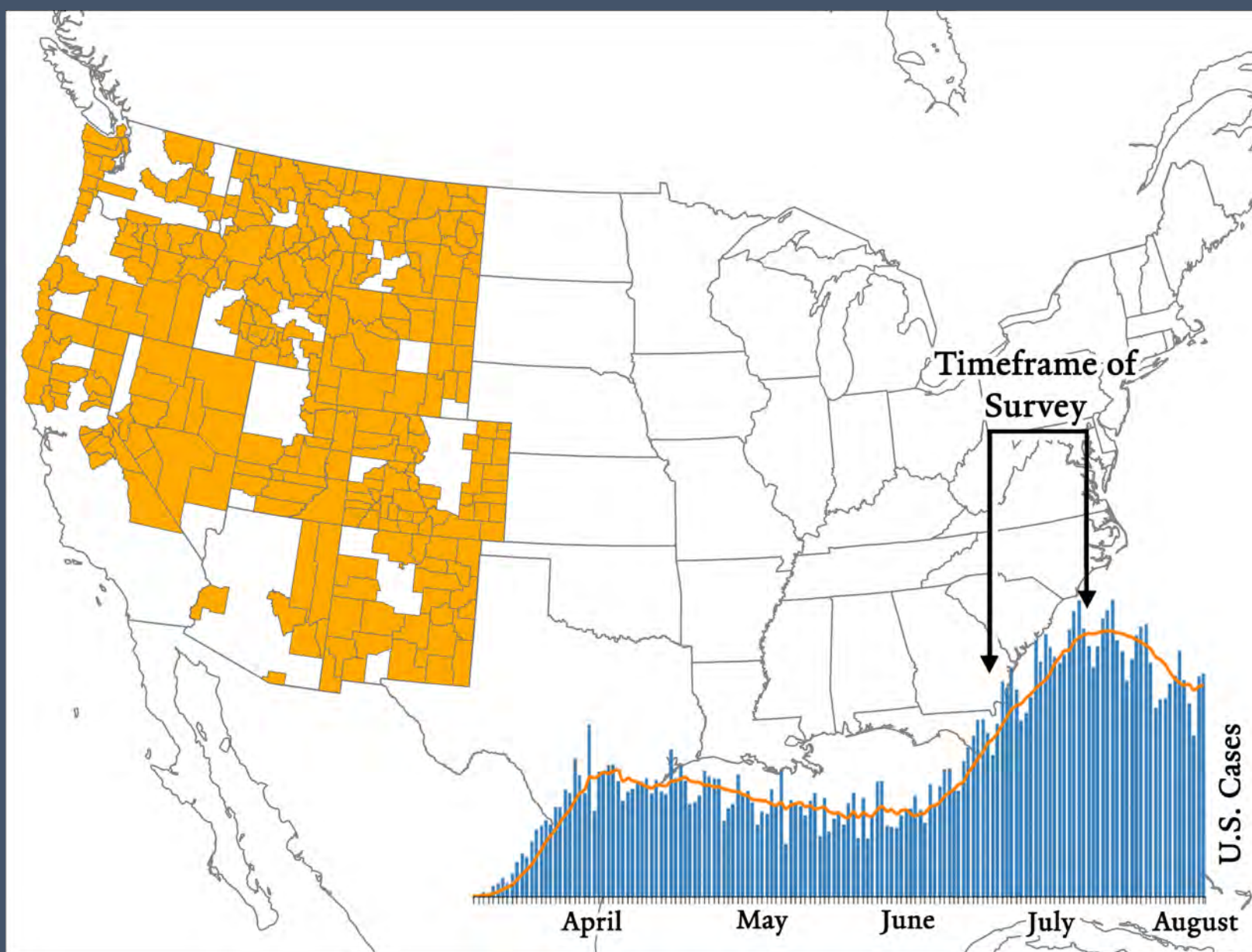
- Three components
  - Initial survey of rural Westerners
    - Conducted June and July of 2020
  - Qualitative case studies of 25 counties
    - Wide spread and of varying economic types
    - Conducting this Fall
  - Follow-up survey
    - Match as many households as possible
    - Conducting this Spring

# Initial Survey

- Survey of 1,009 rural Westerners
  - Rural as non-metropolitan counties
    - No urban core of 50,000 residents
    - Not connected to core urban counties by 25% of commuting
- Mixed mode survey
  - Sample of random addresses pulled from US postal service master file
  - Matched against other databases to ID residents
  - Contacted via phone, email, postcard

# Initial Survey

- Sampling conducted until 1,000 was reached
  - Not pure probability
  - Designed to be at sampling error of  $\pm 3.1\%$  at the 95% confidence level
- Weighted by age, sex, Latino/a, Native American, Education, State



# Caveats

- This is representative of the broad rural West
- Cannot break down by state, county, or region
- May not match the specific experience of some counties, but it does represent what is happening at the 30,000 foot view

# Results Outline

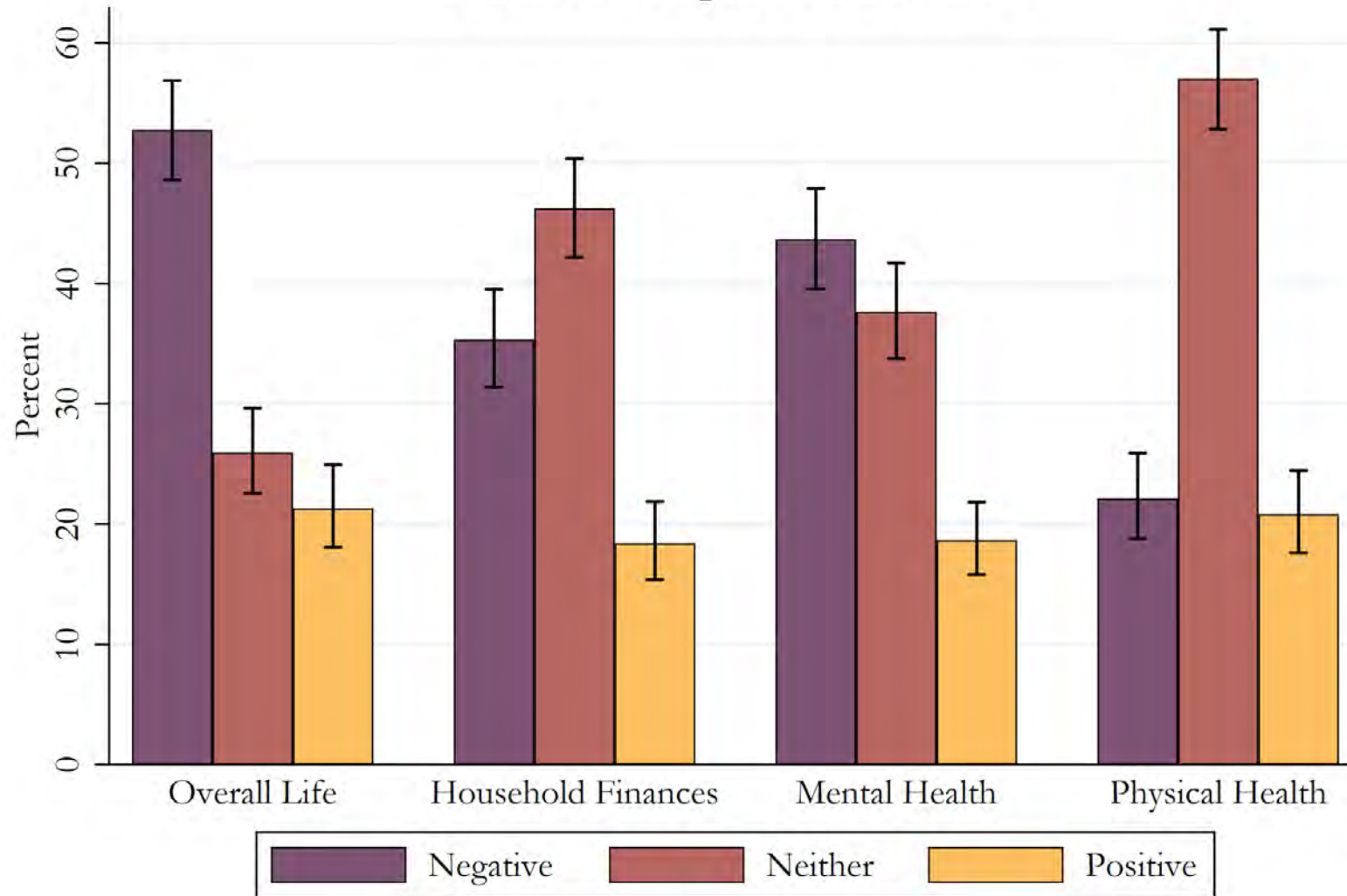
- Who is in our sample?
- Direct Experience with Covid-19
- Perceived impacts of Covid-19
- Impacts to Employment and Unemployment Insurance
- Approval of Government Response
- Attitudes on Government Relief Spending
- Outlook for the Future
- Other important findings



# Direct Experience with Covid-19

- About a **third of rural Westerners** have had direct experience with the virus
  - 2% were either diagnosed or suspected personal infection
  - 9% reported a family had a confirmed or suspected case
  - 19% reported a friend or acquaintance had a confirmed or suspected case
- Adults between 30 and 64 were most likely report direct experience
- Limited variation by education
- No variation by sex or ethnicity

## Perceived Impact of Covid-19



Did not vary significantly by age, sex, education, or ethnicity

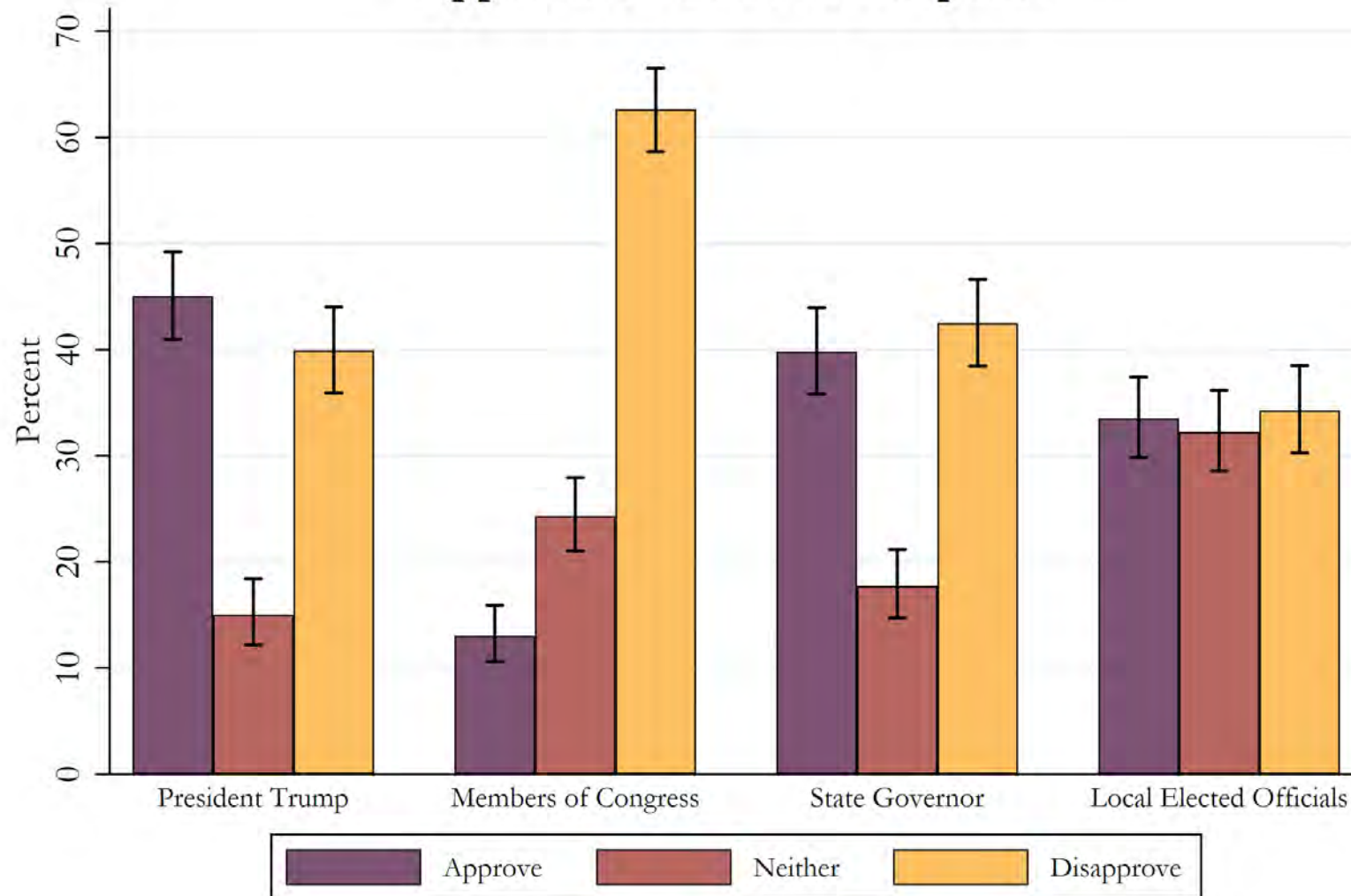
# Impact to Employment

- Of those employed full-time in the year prior to the pandemic, **21%** were not at time of survey
  - Of this 21%...
    - **50%** were temporarily unemployed
    - 28% had gone part-time
- Of those who were part-time pre-pandemic, **41%** were not by time of survey
  - Of this 41%...
    - **73%** were temporarily unemployed
    - 3% were now full-time
- We did not find evidence that this led to increases in informal work

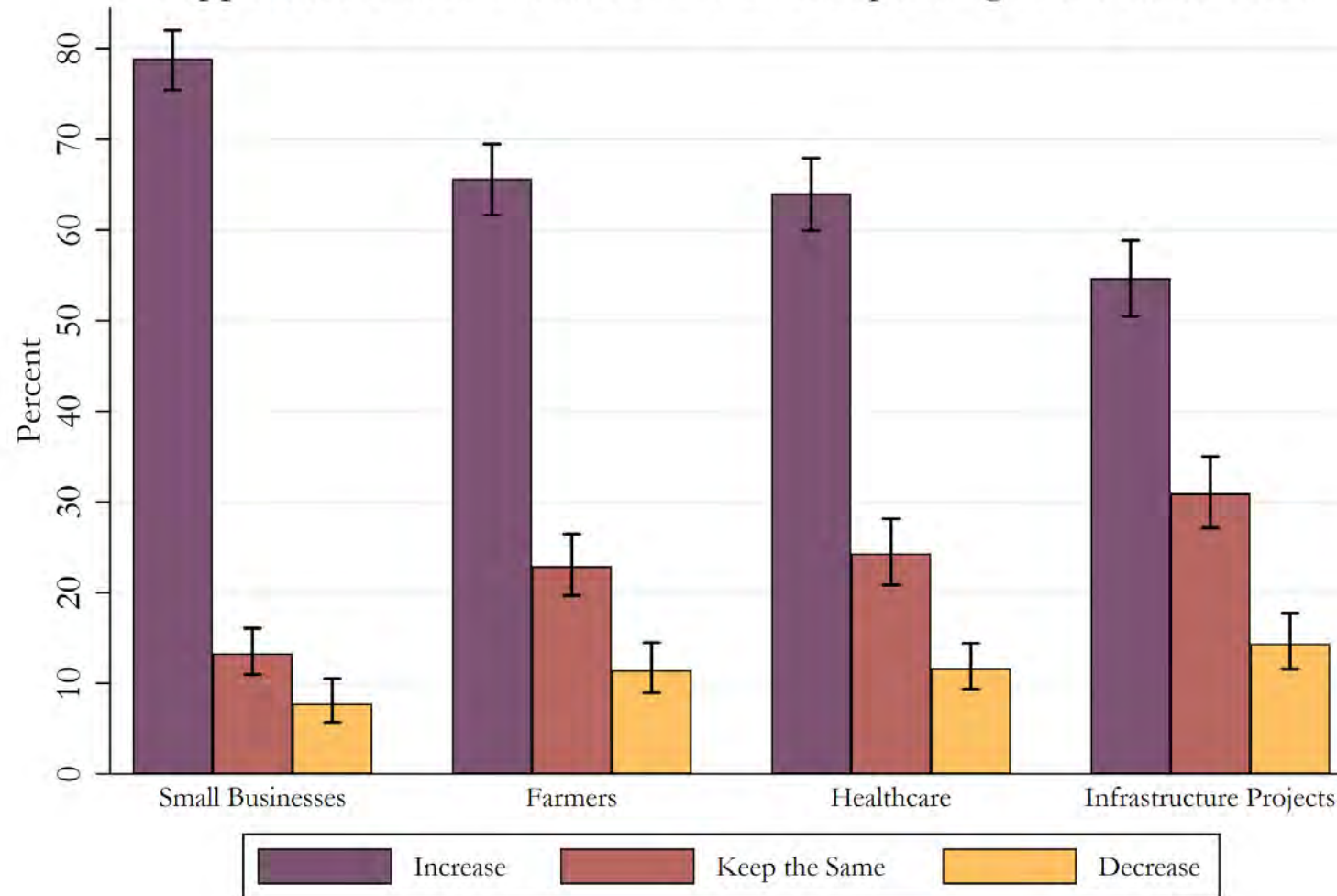
# Impacts to Unemployment Insurance

- In the year prior to the pandemic, **3%** reported household use of unemployment insurance
- At time of survey, **13%** reported household use of unemployment insurance
- Impact to employment and unemployment insurance did not vary significantly by age, sex, education, or ethnicity

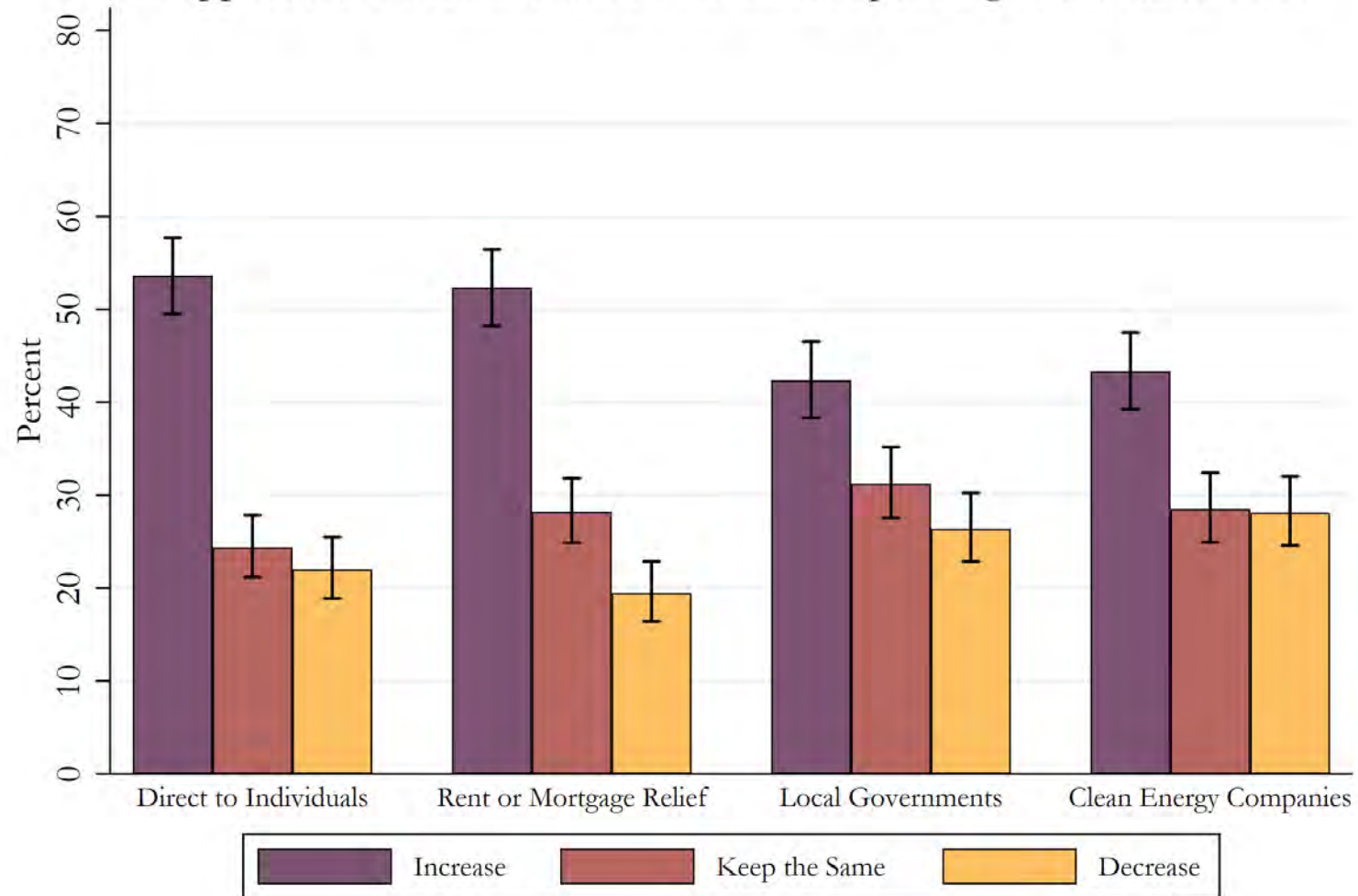
### Approval of Covid-19 Response



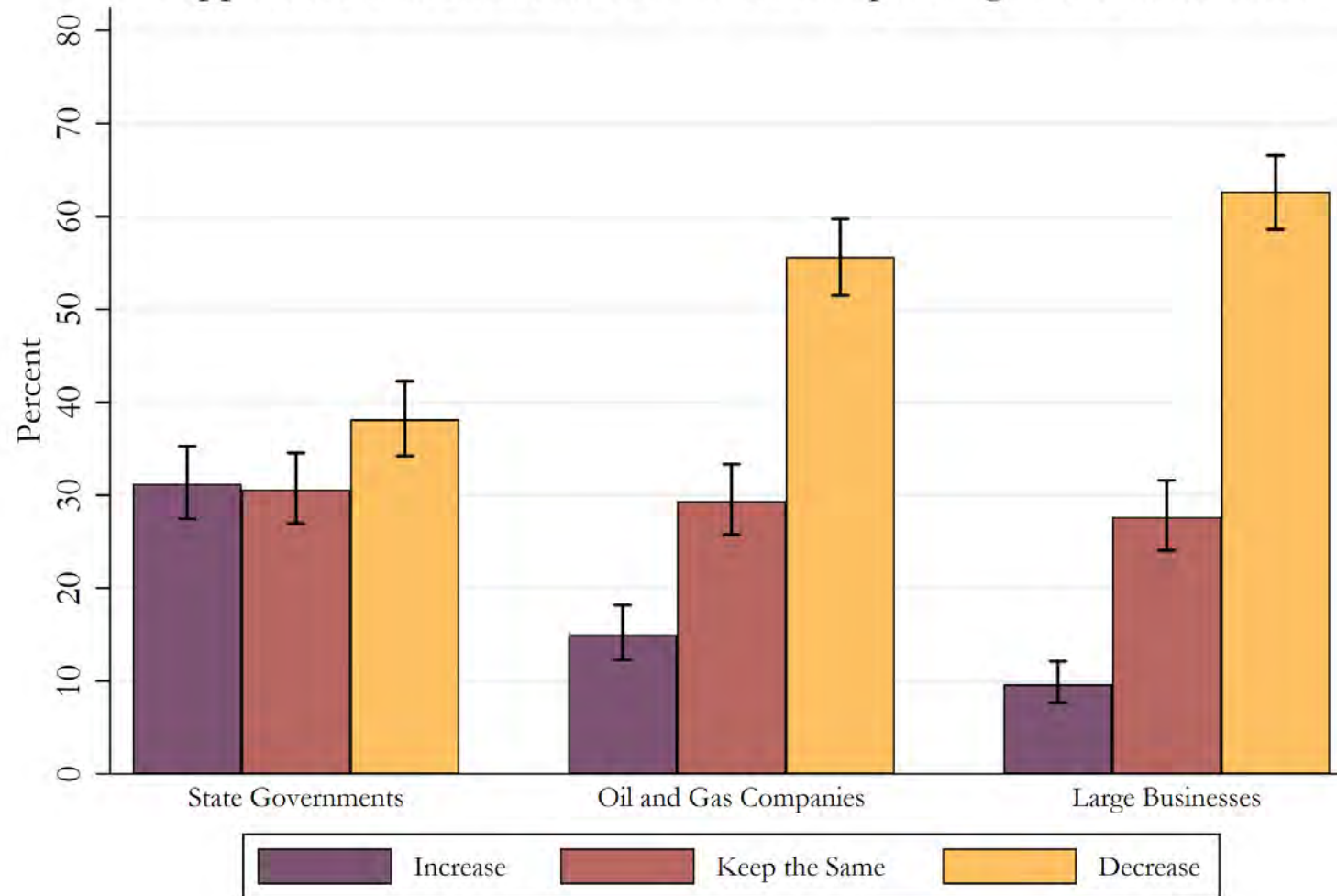
### Support for Government COVID Relief Spending in the Rural West



## Support for Government COVID Relief Spending in the Rural West

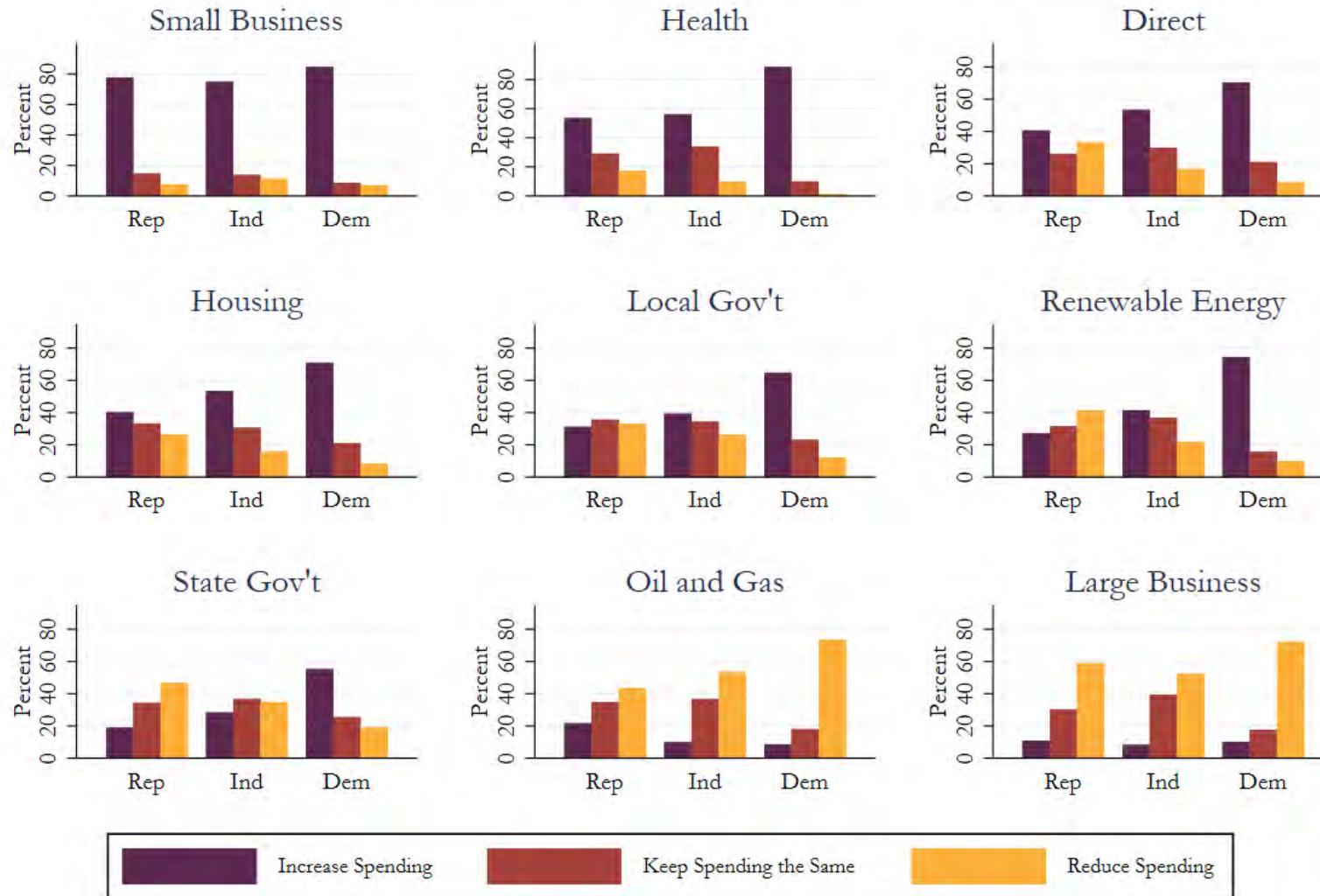


## Support for Government COVID Relief Spending in the Rural West

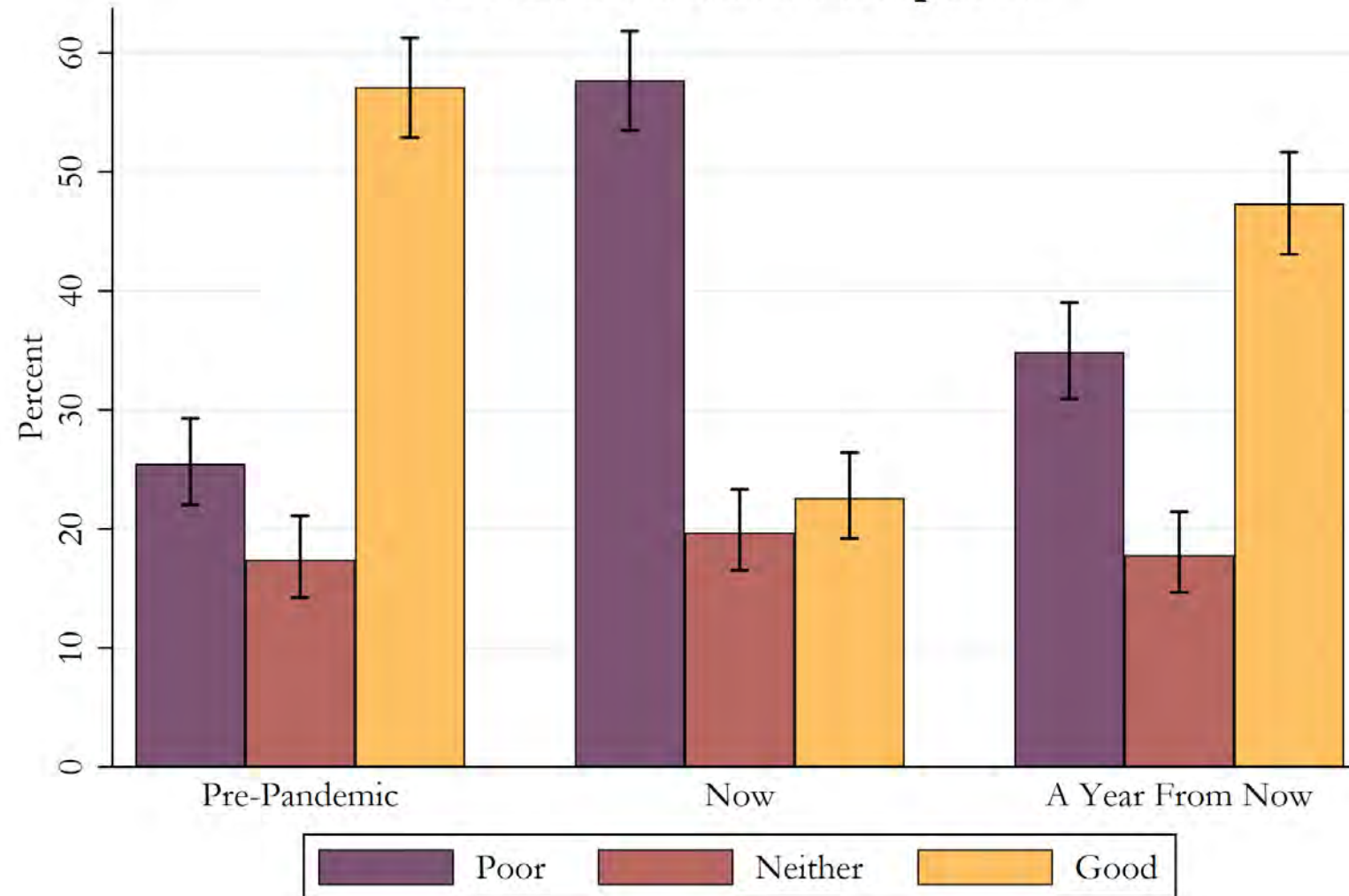




## Support for Government COVID Relief Spending in the Rural West



## Economic Health Perceptions



# Economic Health Perceptions

- Those with higher education were more pessimistic in all periods
- Republicans were more bullish in all periods
- Did not vary by sex, age, or ethnicity

# Other Important Takeaways

- Of households that have children under 16 years old, 18% did not have access to household high-speed internet
- Among those who were uninsured pre-pandemic, 27% gained health insurance coverage by the time of our survey
- Use of credit and savings increased and decreased at a similar level as a result of the pandemic
  - Around 20% reported increases, 20% reported decreases, 52% reported no change, and 7% reported they did not have access to credit or savings.

# Other Important Takeaways

- Attitudes about local forms of natural resource development do not appear to be impacted by the pandemic.
  - Views on various issues (e.g. renewables, oil and gas, and tourism) remained constant whether they reported that their lives were negatively impacted by the pandemic or not.
- Only four types of natural resource development received majority support from rural Westerners
  - Farming and ranching (81%) was strongest, followed by solar (67%), wind (59%), and tourism (57%).
  - Weakest support was expressed for logging (41%), mining (35%), and oil and gas (40%).

# Summary

- We find that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on residents of the rural West
- These impacts are broadly shared across age, sex, ethnicity, and education
  - Although we do see some specific differences, the real story is shared experience
- Many people are out of work, many people are on unemployment insurance, and people want more government spending in many areas

# Summary

- Given the reduction in the extension of unemployment benefits, things may have gotten harder in the rural West since our survey
- Incomplete internet coverage during online education is likely impacting already vulnerable families
- People are optimistic about the future, but current economic sentiment is very poor

# Summary

- This work starts to complete the picture so we have an accurate image of what Covid-19 is doing to the *whole* United States
- More work is needed
  - Case studies
  - Wave two
  - Other efforts so we can know state-specific data
    - Jessica Ulrich-Schad and Jennifer Givens
- If recovery plans are designed without data which reflects the needs of rural people, they may be unsuccessful for these populations



# Thanks!

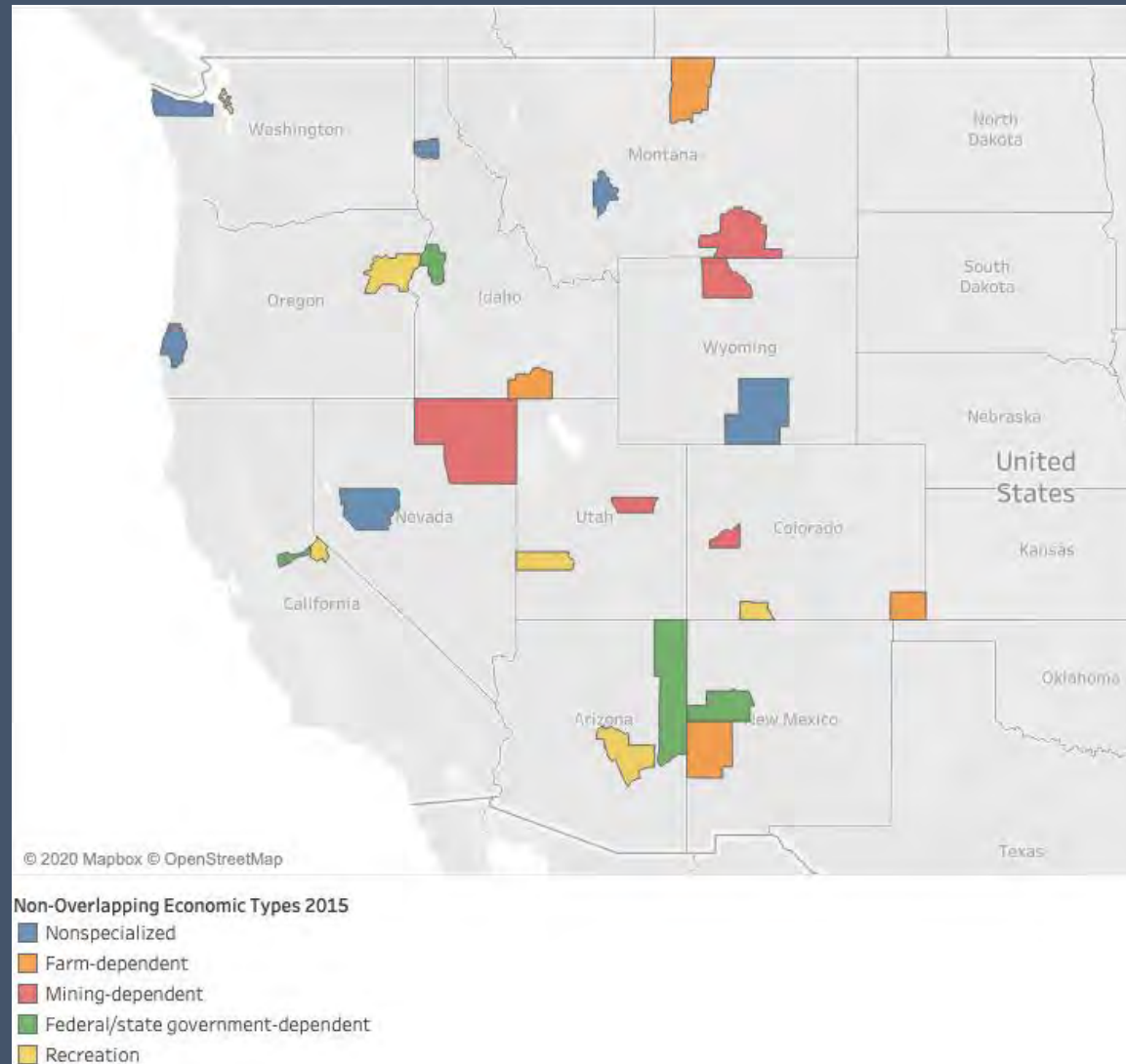
Contact: J. Tom Mueller, [TomMueller@usu.edu](mailto:TomMueller@usu.edu)

Full Report at [CovidRuralWest.org](https://CovidRuralWest.org)

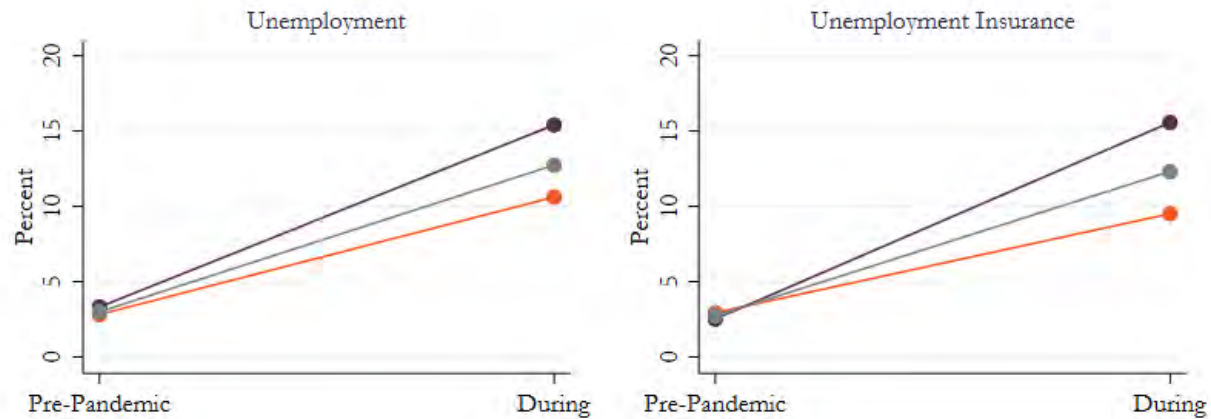
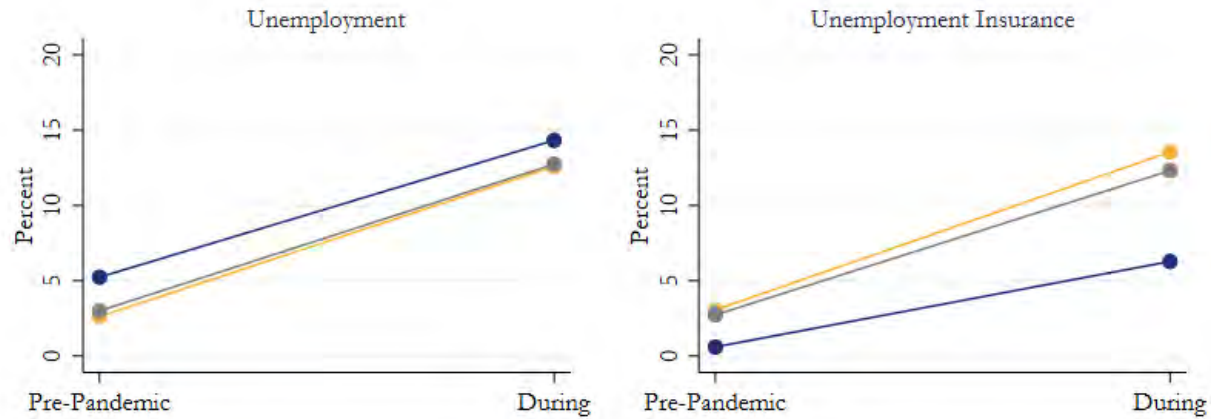
# Who is in our sample?

- Weighted sample was generally representative of the rural West
  - Even gender split
  - Older
  - Predominately white (78%)
  - 15% Latino/a
- Sample was slightly over-representative of middle-aged adults and those with only some college

# Case Study Counties



## COVID-19 and Unemployment



Note: Differences not significant at  $p < .05$



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