

# Was it rural populism? Returning to the country, “catching up,” and trying to understand the Trump vote

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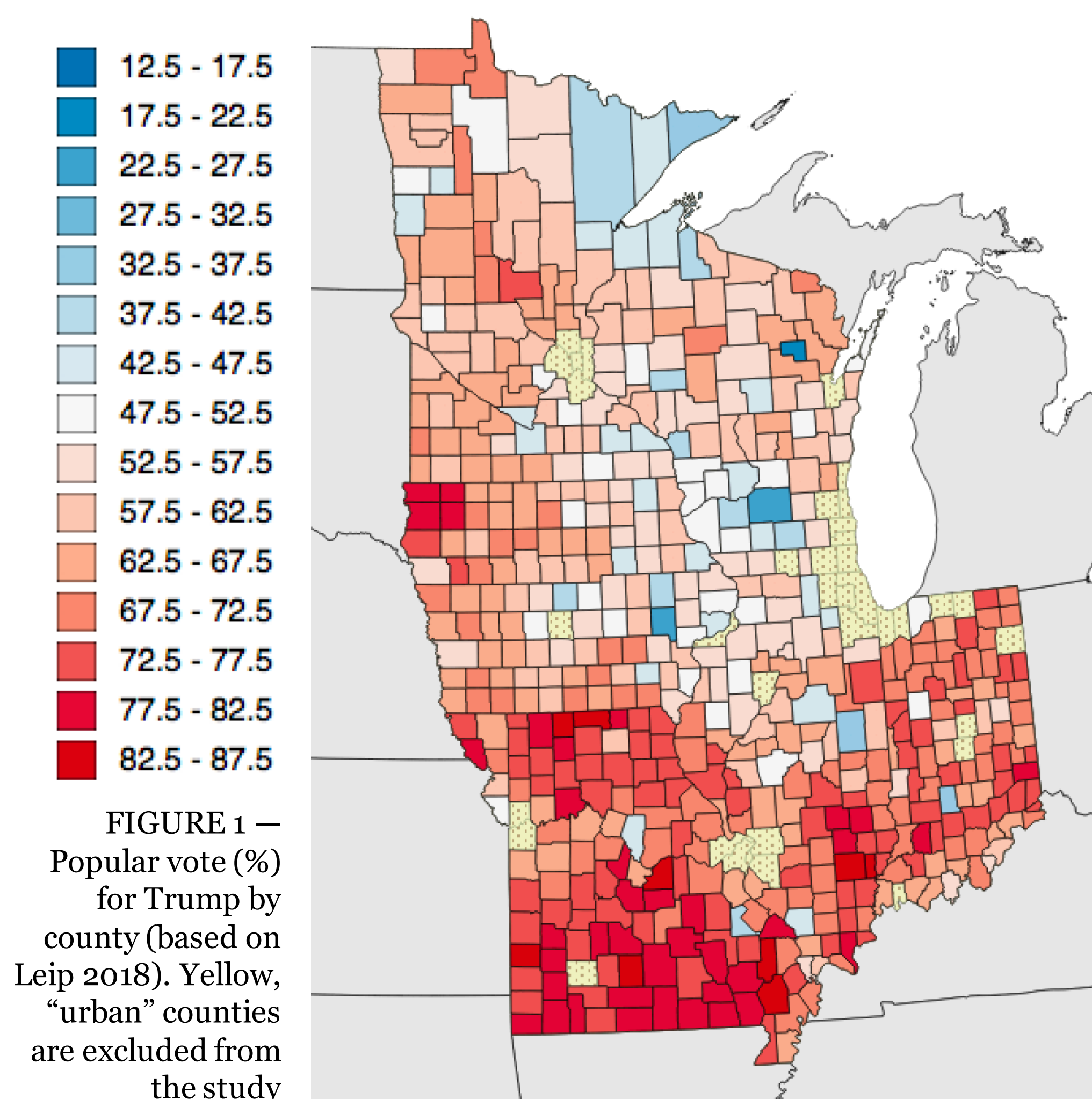
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## Introduction

During the 2016 presidential campaign and ultimate victory of Donald Trump, the rural United States generally, and the Midwest specifically, emerged in popular discourse as “Trump Country.” This framing has often rendered mostly conservative, rural, farming geographies as regressive or backwards bastions of hate in opposition to supposedly mainstream, progressive coasts and cities. That Trump would find support in rural communities provoked popular ridicule during the campaign. After Election Day, such scorn increasingly dovetailed with a kind of incredulous fear, as many in Left and Liberal circles asked collectively: How could this happen?

In this context of political surprise, an overlong list of common diagnoses for Trump’s support in “these here parts” include, but are not limited to: fear and loathing induced by economic restructuring and the long death spiral of American manufacturing; resentment at being “left behind” by burgeoning, urban, creative economies; reactionary racism, misogyny, religious bigotry and/or heteronormativity threatened by a diversifying body politic; and an elite Democratic Party and candidate that presumed superiority over the “country bumpkin.”

These explanations may have purchase, but they also remain incomplete. My research began as an attempt to understand more closely what has happened in recent decades in rural places that could help explain the Trump vote (FIGURE 1). This study specifically examines the farm belt of the upper Midwest.



## Research Motivations

In the 2016 election, Rural Americans, the presumed “they” who were behind Trump, routinely encountered derisive late night television hosts, mainstream journalists, pundits and liberal voters. From the outside, “they” became the butt of jokes. “They” were both laughable and “deplorable.”

My research begins with discomfort at such caricature of the rural. I have argued elsewhere (Jadhav 2017) that derision of rural people (such as Midwesterners) inscribes an Othering discourse. Rural people become a Trump voting “they,” who are “deviant or non-normative” when compared to a liberal or progressive “we” (Mountz 2009). Yes, Trump simultaneously perpetuated a racist, sexist Othering discourse about minorities and women. And, many of his supporters benefit from privileges of a capitalist white, heteropatriarchy (Strolovitch, Wong and Proctor 2017). A vocal minority may even openly support white ethnonationalism. Yet I argue, based on my research, that a complex set of forces enabled the Trump vote, and the president and his voters cannot be seen as a totality.

## Materials and Methods

This mixed methods research combines the qualitative findings of an intense, two-week trip to the small rural town of Henry, Illinois, with a large-n statistical analysis of a dataset compiled from U.S. census and other data\* for 537 “rural” counties in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Missouri and Wisconsin.

This project relies on autobiography and a kind of “insider” perspective (Taylor 2011); I spent six years as a child and teen in Henry where my father was a Methodist minister. Out of 22 interviewees, 20 had resided there during the same period as my family, including former classmates, their parents, teachers, church members and business owners. Combined with my knowledge of local social economy and geography, my quasi-ethnographic findings are read through and against the quantitative data in univariate descriptive statistics, bivariate correlation tests and multivariate OLS regression (TABLE 1).

## Multivariate Analysis

The analysis\* below focuses on two different dependent variables at the county level: Trump’s overall vote percentage and the intensity of the Trump vote. The latter is measured by the distance between Trump’s support and the average vote garnered by other winning Republican presidential candidates since 1984.

TABLE 1 — Multivariate predictors of Trump vote and voting intensity

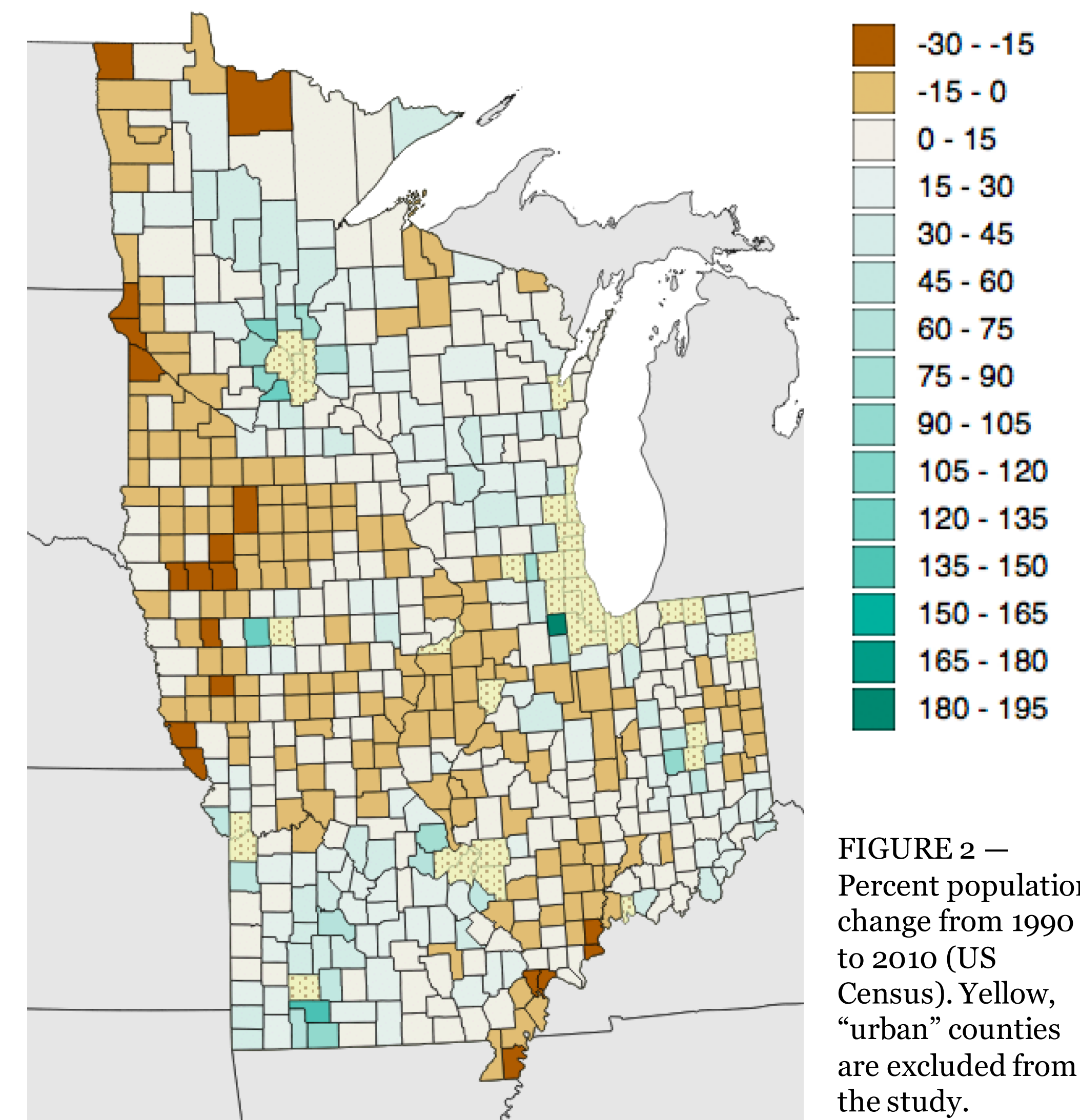
Independent variables (2010/11)	2016 Trump vote		Trump vote intensity	
	B	Sig.	B	Sig.
18 to 29 years old (%)	0.115**	0.003	-0.017	0.667
Non-white (%)	-0.107**	0.004	-0.103**	0.006
Foreign born (%)	-0.060†	0.081	-0.089*	0.011
Husband and wife households (%)	0.570**	0	0.085	0.106
Education, up to high school diploma (%)	0.321**	0	0.305**	0
16 to 34 years old, unemployed but in labor force (%)	0.01	0.75	-0.016	0.624
Ratio, women not in labor force to women in labor force	0.151**	0	0.015	0.726
Household income under \$60,000 (%)	0.341**	0	0.171**	0.005
Worked at home (%)	-0.072*	0.037	-0.012	0.726
Housing, owner-occupied, no debt (%)	0.134**	0.002	0.381**	0
Agriculture, forestry, fishing and mining jobs (%)	-0.163**	0.001	0.016	0.736
Construction jobs (%)	-0.042	0.229	0.056	0.117
Manufacturing jobs (%)	-0.121**	0.003	-0.101*	0.017
Retail trade jobs (%)	0.003	0.92	0.012	0.681
Finance, insurance and real estate jobs (%)	-0.033	0.326	0.009	0.787
Land-cover, cropland, pasture, hay (%)	0.143**	0	-0.122**	0.001
	Adj. R <sup>2</sup> = 63.2%		Adj. R <sup>2</sup> = 61.6%	

\*\* Significant at the 0.01 level.

\* Significant at the 0.05 level.

† Significant at the 0.1 level.

\*For details and data definitions, contact the author.



## A Story of Populism

Populism has a diverse political and theoretical lineage (Laclau 2005; Müller 2016). The qualitative and quantitative findings of my research together gesture to the multi-decade narrative below of a contemporary agrarian populism (c.f. Dudley 2000; Wuthnow 2018) emerging in the “heartland.”

*Consider that Midwestern farmers enjoy high corn prices for more than a decade in the 2000s. Such security is a far cry from the misery of the 1980s that put many a farmer out of business. The windfall encourages more industrialization: bigger tractors and implements and the hope of even bigger harvests. Such “success” offers the chance for rural daughters and sons to realize aspirations of higher education and a life beyond the farm. This precipitates a decline in farm jobs coinciding with wider de-industrialization and new urban dynamism elsewhere. The waning of farm and factory jobs — two economic and demographic pillars of the countryside — forecloses prospects in the rural hamlets that dot the land between bright cities. College-educated former country kids find new city opportunities and lifestyles. Amid rural stagnation (FIGURE 2), an aging body politic — including a smaller but precarious remnant young generation — indeed may feel left behind. Some perhaps even imagine that elsewhere an Other has been getting ahead unfairly (c.f. Hochschild 2016). Politicians of varying stripes nurture such long-simmering suspicions purposefully or unintentionally, with both action and inaction. Yet the countryside also changes as new faces and urban connections appear. The once-remote Other is now closer to home. When confronted with both socioeconomic upheaval and slowly increasing demographic diversity, change may be read as “community” decline. Feeling abandoned, some rural residents recoil from the perceived snobbery, politics and dysfunction of the metropole. Rural conservatives harbor festering suspicions that leaders are just not concerned with “people like us.”*

This real-life scenario has taken years to materialize, but it has enabled Trump, himself an elite, to play the brash champion and claim a maverick mantle tinged with bigoted dogwhistling. His populist sociopathy — and particularly that of his most ardent supporters — becomes something to overlook in the rural voters’ bargain for political power and attention.

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