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Commentary

Why Is Our Politics So Polarized? The New Hampshire Political System and the Rural/Urban Split

—Ben Mackillop

During the summer of 2020, I conducted research on polarization in the New Hampshire state legislature. I was inspired to investigate this topic primarily through my personal experience growing up in rural Coös county in northern New Hampshire and coming to college at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) in a much more urban area of the state. I noticed stark differences in political attitudes between the two areas. In my hometown and surrounding areas, many people share a common culture of hunting, fishing, and other outdoor activities, despite disagreements over politics, whereas at UNH in Durham, many people seem much more polarized, not wanting to associate with those with whom they disagree. Furthermore, after coming to UNH and living on campus during the 2020 presidential primary election, I observed that those living in the more populated southern area of the state seemed much more entrenched in national politics, and that energy seemed to transcend local politics, whereas in my rural hometown, people seem focused much more on local issues. This led me to wonder whether rural legislators' voting patterns mirrored their constituents and favored a more diverse range of opinions, as opposed to the hard-lined party priorities we see in national politics.

As a result of this curiosity, I decided to apply for the Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) through UNH's Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research. Funding through the REAP program allowed me to spend my summer gaining more knowledge of political science research and politics within New Hampshire. Dr. Dante Scala, a professor of political science at UNH with whom I had taken a class, became my mentor, and his expertise helped guide my research. My project's objective was to investigate the differences in voting patterns between rural and urban legislators by analyzing voting records on a selection of bills covering various topics including abortion, gun control, marijuana legalization, local taxes, and the minimum wage. I also interviewed legislators representing both parties from both rural and urban areas of the state.

I developed my hypothesis that rural state legislators would be more likely than urban legislators to vote against the majority opinion of their party if they felt it would help their constituents. I expected this to be especially the case on polarizing issues where different experiences between those in rural areas and those in urban areas affect their opinions. However, I found the opposite to be true. This reality pushed me to shift the focus of my personal interviews to try to understand why our state politics is so polarized.



Ben Mackillop

Background on NH Politics

New Hampshire has long been a swing state in both national and state level politics. Until very recently, it was common for New Hampshire's senators and congressional representatives to be split between Republicans and Democrats, and for the governor's office and control of state politics to also cycle back and forth. This split is emphasized well in the recent 2020 election where all three of New Hampshire's national races (plus the presidential race) were won by Democrats, but the governorship and control of the state house and senate were won by the Republicans. In the 2019-20 session which I used for my data, Democrats held control of the state house 233-162 over Republicans, with both rural and urban areas being split proportionally the same.

In order to properly study the rural/urban relationship within New Hampshire, I had to develop my own definition of rural as it pertains to my research. As defined by the US census bureau, a rural district is defined as an area with a population of less than 2,500. Due to the nature of many New Hampshire house districts being combinations of multiple towns, and many towns being in the 3,000-4,000-population range while being obviously rural, I decided to modify my definition of rural to populations of 5,000 or less. In addition, a rural district could not be adjacent to one of the five cities with the greatest populations (Manchester, Nashua, Concord, Derry, and Dover).

In order to gauge the different opinions of rural and urban legislators, I focused on the publicly available voting records from the 2019-20 legislative session. This allowed me to easily analyze data from bills in multiple different issue areas and compare the voting patterns. In deciding which bills to focus on, I wanted to pick issues that were polarizing and that I could theorize reasons why someone from a rural area would think differently than someone from an urban area. I ultimately focused on five issues: abortion, gun control, tax increases, legalization of marijuana, and raising the minimum wage. Each of these issues comes with two very opinionated sides.



The New Hampshire House of Representatives meeting outdoors on UNH's memorial field during December 2020. *Photo credit: Jeremy Gasowski.*

Voting Trends: Rural vs. Non-rural

Contradicting my hypothesis, I saw very little variation in the voting patterns of rural representatives versus urban members of the same party. This showed me that despite the separation from the craziness of national politics, state representatives typically fell in line with their parties' established majority, as opposed to working towards compromise, even on issues that affect the rural and urban areas very differently. For example, while I had expected that some rural Democrats might vote in opposition to their party on some issues like gun control, where more rural people will be against it, the opposite was true.

I found it challenging to move forward with my research when my hypothesis was proven wrong by my data. Where my original assumptions had been relatively optimistic about state representatives going against party lines to better represent their voters, I realized our state government is polarized in very similar ways to our national government. This revelation inspired me to question why our state legislature is so polarized on issues that we as voters would hope are places for compromise. While I had always planned to do interviews with legislators as a part

of my research process, this led to me change the structure of the interviews to focus on polarization in New Hampshire politics.

Interviews

I conducted 30–45-minute interviews of state legislators whose voting records I found particularly interesting during my preliminary research. I picked legislators who were outliers in my data for various reasons. Some were outliers due to their party or location (i.e. a rural Democrat in an otherwise Republican dominated area) whereas others were outliers because they voted against the majority of their party on some of the bills I analyzed. While I reached out to twelve different representatives of interest, I interviewed five: two rural Democrats, one urban Democrat, one rural Republican, and one urban Republican. These interviews, conducted over Zoom, allowed me to gain more insight into the representatives' thought processes in voting the way they did as well as on political polarization in general. The interviews proved very fruitful in advancing my personal understanding of polarization in New Hampshire politics.

One rural Democratic representative I interviewed expressed to me that while they felt responsible to their constituents, at the end of the day they were elected to be a representative for the state as a whole, and not just the town they are from. Under this philosophy, they explained to me that they would vote in favor of a bill they felt "might do harm" to their town or constituents, if they felt it was the best decision for the state as a whole. This was a very interesting philosophy for me to unpack, as it in some ways helps to explain the results of my research, but is very counter-intuitive to the role, as we typically see our locally elected officials as representing our interests. I discussed this idea further with the representative and they felt very strongly that looking out for the interests of their constituents exclusively would be immoral in their role as a representative.

Another rural Democrat representative I interviewed expressed great dismay for many of the urban "city Democrats" that become elected officials after moving to New Hampshire from other states. We spoke for over an hour, largely about the minimum wage bill that had gone through the New Hampshire house of representatives earlier in 2020. While the representative I interviewed expressed their support for a ten dollar per hour minimum wage bill that they believed could actually be passed and signed into law with support from Republicans, some of their Democratic colleagues had different goals. As they explained to me, many of the leading Democrats favored passing a fifteen dollar per hour minimum wage bill with the expressed purpose of that bill being vetoed by Republican Governor Chris Sununu and being able to use that veto as a campaign tactic in the upcoming election.

However, the urban Democrat I interviewed expressed that they cared much more about the urgency of a higher minimum wage because they believed a lower increase (such as ten dollars per hour) would not be enough. When I asked them about the concerns many have from rural areas of the state, such as the impact such a bill could have on small businesses that struggle to raise wages, they expressed that they believed a higher minimum wage would be good for everyone in New Hampshire and that while it might force some businesses to adapt, the status quo must be changed.



The New Hampshire state Capitol Building, the normal meeting place for the state legislature. Courtesy of <http://www.gencourt.state.nh.us/>

The Republicans I interviewed (one urban and one rural) never strayed from party lines on the bills I analyzed, and both of them strongly felt that given their place as the minority party, it was crucial for them to vote together in opposition to the Democrats. They agreed with the sentiments of the rural Democrat who opposed a fifteen dollar per hour minimum wage, feeling that passing such a bill was not realistic for many businesses, and that they were willing to compromise on a smaller increase. The eventual outcome of this bill was the legislature passing the fifteen dollar per hour minimum wage with very few Democrats and most Republicans opposing, and the bill ultimately being vetoed by Governor Chris Sununu, as expected.

Overall, I found in both my data and my limited sample size of interviews that the Republicans in the state tend to act more unified than the Democrats. These results could arise from a multitude of reasons, such as views on certain key social issues, such as LGBT rights or abortion rights, leading some conservatives to run as Democrats or simply the nature of the minority party operating with more unity. Regardless, these various interviews compliment my data very well and tell a lot about the current state of our New Hampshire political system.

Final Thoughts

Learning about the overwhelmingly partisan nature of politics in the state capital greatly changed my thoughts on our political process. Before my research, I believed that at the state level, politicians compromised and helped solve issues for the state, as opposed to catering to party interests like at the national level, a belief I suspect is held by many people uninformed on state politics. I had hoped that our state politicians would put party differences and petty politics aside in pursuit of the best outcome for the people of New Hampshire, however, my research showed the exact opposite. The vast majority of our state representatives, both rural and urban, rarely stray from party lines on any polarizing piece of legislation.

Despite the pessimistic reality this presents, the process of conducting these interviews was a positive experience for me as a researcher. Going from seeing someone's name and a list of their votes during my preliminary data analysis to having a face-to-face (virtual) conversation about these important topics brings into perspective just how important it is to have these conversations with people and to understand the nuances of these issues. While I was somewhat disappointed with the outcomes of my research, it gave me a new perspective, and I do think there is hope for more respectful discourse in the future. If we can begin to recognize the failures of our political system and our representatives to accurately represent our interests, we can begin to change these systems for the better.

I believe this research has large implications for our understanding of the political landscape within our state and country as a whole. Polarization is a problem at the national level, but it starts at the state level. If we cannot fix the political polarization we have in New Hampshire, there is little hope that our leaders in Washington D.C. will begin to cooperate better. While the polarization of our national politics might be out of reach, we can all work towards a healthier political society at a local level through our own conversations on controversial topics, trying to truly understand each other's needs and opinions, instead of simply trying to win an argument.

I would like to extend my thanks to my mentor, Professor Dante Scala, for helping guide me through the research process and advising my work, all while navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. I would also like to thank everyone at the Hamel Center for Undergraduate Research, as well as all of the donors whose contributions made my research possible: Mr. Dana Hamel, the Rogers Family Undergraduate Research Fund, and Mr. John Greene. Lastly, I would like to thank all of the legislators who helped contribute to my research process and all public servants, regardless of your politics, seeking to create a more positive political culture.

Author and Mentor Bios

Ben Mackillop is a second-year student at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) and a member of the University Honors Program and Pi Sigma Alpha, the political science honors society. Moving from his rural hometown of Lancaster, New Hampshire, to UNH came with a culture shock, as he interacted with students of diverse backgrounds and political views. He began to consider how living in a rural as opposed to an urban area can impact people's political views. This inspired his research into how New Hampshire representatives vote based on the place that they represent, and how often their votes oppose party lines. Ben completed this research through a Research Experience and Apprenticeship Program (REAP) grant. Participating in this project taught him how to perform effective research under the safety conditions in place due to COVID-19, and he hopes that his article will encourage other undergraduate students to pursue research opportunities. As part of an accelerated B.A./M.A. program, Ben will graduate in the spring of 2022 with a bachelor's degree in political science, with minors in economics and security studies, and then in 2023 with a master's degree in political science. After that, Ben plans to pursue law school.

Dante J. Scala, a professor in the political science department, began working at the University of New Hampshire (UNH) in 2007. His teaching and research include American politics, campaigns and elections, the presidential nomination process, New Hampshire politics, and voter demography. Dr. Scala says that having worked with Ben in the past made the challenges presented to their project by the 2020 pandemic manageable, and only wishes that Ben could have experienced conducting his interviews with state representatives in person. Dr. Scala has worked with several undergraduate students in the past, and emphasizes the importance of conducting research with the public early in a student's career. He believes that talking to people students are interested in adds a whole new dimension to their understanding. After twenty years of teaching, Dr. Scala feels that the ability to write clearly and concisely, particularly for a broad audience like *Inquiry's*, is an incredibly useful skill that distinguishes excellent students from their peers.