It's Pennsylvania Stupid!
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Bill Clinton's political consultant James Carville may be most famous for his 1992 campaign slogan Its the economy stupid, but before his national debut he helped elect Bob Casey governor in 1986 and Harris Wofford US Senator in 1991. He left his campaign days in Pennsylvania with an equally memorable expression: Pennsylvania is Philadelphia and Pittsburgh with Alabama in between.

Carville's now famous aphorism expressed succinctly the conventional wisdom that the rural-urban divide is a major fault line cutting across Pennsylvania politics--the Country Mouse vs. the City Mouse. Everyone knows that the hicks in the sticks are very different from the slicks in the city. They think differently, care about different issues, and, more importantly, they vote differently.

The problem with the conventional wisdom is that it may be wrong, and it almost certainly is grossly misleading. This surprising conclusion is based on some comparative research completed at the Millersville University Center for Opinion Research by its Director Berwood Yost. Yost reviewed nearly 20 statewide polls, conducted between 1996 and 2001--to compare the responses of rural county and urban county residents on more than 400 attitudinal and behavioral items. A rural county is defined using the widely accepted Center for Rural Pennsylvanias list of 42 rural counties.

Let's begin with opinions and attitudes on some of the political hot button issues--the so-called cultural issues. Here the conventional wisdom predicts big differences. But the data beg to differ. For example, the same percentage of ruralites and urbanites think that abortions should be illegal under any circumstances (20%). In other words, rural and urban areas each have the same percentages of their inhabitants who are strong pro lifers.

What about this example: almost the same percentages of rural and urban dwellers (20%) somewhat or strongly oppose equal rights based on gender identity. So much for big cultural differences here. Finally, there is the gay rights issue, another politically sensitive issue, in which the same percentage of both country and city residents (20%) are against giving homosexuals equal rights.

So, okay, the hot button issue differences have been oversold, but surely there are big differences on the bread and butter issues. Maybe! But again the data do not reveal many. You might think, for instance, that the rural and urban dwellers in the state would have different priorities regarding the problems the state faces. But if you thought that, you would be wrong.

In fact, rural residents and urban residents agree to a remarkable degree about what are the states most important problems. As late as last October, both rural and urban residents agreed that terrorism, the economy, and education were the top concerns. No difference here. And what should state leaders be doing? Again, urban and rural residents agree that fighting terrorism, promoting a good economy, fighting crime, and improving basic education are the most important issues that state political leaders should address. No difference here, either.
Then, there is the matter of ideological difference. Everyone knows that folks in rural areas are more conservative than folks in urban areas. But here again, the data do not bear out conventional wisdom. Urban and rural residents are equally likely to call themselves conservatives (roughly a third of the population say they are conservative). And both urban and rural inhabitants are about equally likely to report they listen to political talk shows (about 40%).

Now, certainly there are some limits to the similarities. For example, rural and urban residents have different views about the death penalty and about gun control. More rural residents (56%) believe the death penalty is fairly applied than do urban residents (34%), and urban residents (43%) are more likely than rural residents (31%) to strongly favor gun control.

And there are other differences as well. Rural residents tend to be somewhat more sanguine (10%) about improvements in public education; urban residents are somewhat more satisfied (10%) with their housing, and rural residents are somewhat more in favor (12%) of government help for those who cannot pay their heating bills.

But even where the differences are real and statistically significant, they tend to be small differences—on the order of ten percent or so. Only in a handful of policy areas are the differences numerically large.

And in the few instances where the differences are substantial, they often contradict prevailing stereotypes. Attitudes toward state intervention provide examples. Stereotypically, rural residents eschew government regulation and oppose excessive regulation of the market place, making them the ultimate rugged individualists and defenders of the free market system. But again, the data suggest a different conclusion.

Rural residents are much more likely (63%) than urban residents (49%) to think that state government should intervene more frequently to help solve the problems of our communities. They prefer government intervention instead of turning to individuals and private companies for solutions.

And more stereotype busting data exist. Rural folks are less likely (54% to 65%) to think they can depend on competition to keep prices at fair levels. And they are more likely (48% to 40%) to believe that patients should have the right to sue their health plan or employer for medical decisions that affect their medical condition.

The point to make is not that there are no important political differences between rural and urban areas. But rather that the differences that exist are mostly differences of degree rather than of kind. Rural areas have much more in common with urban areas than is generally supposed—and the differences that do exist may become smaller over time.

A relevant question here: is whether the urban-rural divide ever really existed? Was it ever real?

Abundant evidence suggests that it once was very real—earlier in state history when transportation and communication barriers aggravated the distance between country and city. In the not too distant past, most Pennsylvanians probably never traveled further in their lifetimes than the next county.

But today, interstate highways, the Internet, mass media and other technological changes have created a much more mobile and culturally homogenous population. Naturally, some fundamental differences still exist across
this vast and diverse state. But the differences today are mainly along regional lines—east vs. west, and along demographic lines: age, race and gender.

These days the Country Mouse and the City Mouse have more and more in common, and disagree about less and less. And so Mr. Carville, your famous one liner about the economy may still be right, but James you need a new definition for Pennsylvania. Between Pittsburgh and Philadelphia is just a lot more Pennsylvania. Or as you yourself might put it: Its Pennsylvania stupid.

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