

Political Polarization and Place: Shifting Electoral Patterns in the 'American Heartland'

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Abstract

Recent United States' elections signal a decline in political moderation and a sharp right turn towards partisan polarization, authoritarianism, and ethno-nationalism. This paper focuses on the landscape of politics in the state of Iowa, and the American Heartland more broadly, to examine the significance of social, economic, and geographic indicators in this changing U.S. political culture. These political trends are similar to the British vote to exit the European Union and other shifts toward more populist, nationalist, and anti-immigrant political candidates in Europe. Our research uses regression analyses of county-level data to determine the relative contribution of three factors reputed to have caused the swing to more conservative politicians in Iowa and the Heartland. Findings indicate that rurality and two measures of social identity, education, and whiteness contributed to Iowa's political shift in the 2016 general election and the 2018 midterm election. This research demonstrates how factors that tend to bind voters into communities of identity - rurality, whiteness, and low education – are the very factors that drive political polarization. These findings have significant implications for broader regional and international political culture and voting patterns in the future.