



# Are Rural Republicans Different When It Comes to Public Opinion on Education Policy?

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## **Are Rural Republicans Different When It Comes to Public Opinion on Education Policy?**

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### **Abstract**

Conservative education policy in the United States increasingly emphasizes school choice, decentralization, and parental authority. This chapter examines whether these priorities resonate equally across geographic contexts, focusing specifically on rural Republicans. Using data from the 2015–2022 Education Next surveys, we find that while partisanship strongly structures education attitudes, rural Republicans diverge from their non-rural counterparts on policies such as charter schools, vouchers, standardized testing, and national standards. These findings suggest that education politics may be conditionally nationalized, with rural institutional realities shaping how successful conservative education policy agendas can be.

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Over the past two decades, education has moved from the periphery of American partisan conflict toward its center. Issues, such as curriculum, school finance, and student identity, that were once negotiated primarily at the local and state levels and often across partisan lines are now commonly debated as part of a national ideological struggle between the two major political parties (Henig, 2013; Henig et al., 2019; Shah et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of organized parental-rights movements, and a surge of state-level intervention in school governance accelerated this transformation. As education politics has taken on a more partisan tone in recent years, partisan gaps in public attitudes toward education issues have emerged, driven primarily by individuals adopting new positions to align their attitudes with those of their political identity and party (Houston, 2024). Political conflict over education is no longer merely contentious; it is now contentious along party lines with each side offering a notably different vision for the future of public education in the U.S.

This nationalization of education politics raises important questions about how citizens in different places experience and respond to ongoing education policy debates, particularly in rural America. In recent years, rural communities have become the Republican Party's electoral stronghold, while metropolitan areas have consolidated their alignment with Democrats (Scala & Johnson, 2017; Gimpel et al., 2020; Lyons & Utych, 2023). In many policy domains, this spatial realignment by partisan identity means that “rural” and “Republican” are nearly interchangeable. In recent work, Lin and Lunz Trujillo (2024) show that, once partisan identity is accounted for, rural/non-rural gap differences in policy attitudes—toward issues such as immigration, healthcare, guns, and voting—largely disappear. In many cases, “rural” means “Republican.”

Whether this is also true for education policy is an open and politically important question. Education holds a distinctive institutional position at the local level in American federalism—one that has the potential to interrupt the alignment between place and party identity. Public elementary and secondary schools have traditionally been governed by local school boards, staffed by individuals from the surrounding community, financed heavily through local funds, and embedded in local community life in ways that few other public institutions are. Historically, these same features insulated education from

partisan conflict and allowed place-based experiences to shape opinion (Tyack, 1974; Henig, 2013; Jacobsen & Saultz, 2012). The connections between local communities and their schools have the potential to create cross-pressures when what residents believe is best for their communities may not align with the prevailing political party messaging.

Although partisan sorting has reshaped the public's attitudes toward education policy, it has not done so uniformly across issues. Specifically, views on school performance, the Common Core, charter schools, and education spending levels have all become more polarized along party lines (Houston, 2024). In addition, more recent debates about race, gender, and pandemic-era policies have unambiguously divided rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans (Collins, 2023; 2024; Houston et al., 2022; Polikoff et al., 2022). On the other hand, some long-standing issues like testing, private-school vouchers, and online classes continue to exhibit relatively modest partisan gaps among ordinary Americans (Houston, 2024).

Increasingly, conservative education politics in the United States has emphasized school choice, privatization, parental authority, and even state preemption of local control (Shah et al., 2024). Yet rural school systems face distinctive material constraints that may put them at odds with such policies: smaller enrollments, longer transportation routes, teacher shortages, lower property values, and the relative absence of private school options that make many of these reforms especially challenging to implement (Malhoit, 2005; Brenner, 2019; Dobis et al., 2021; Arsen et al., 2021). Whether rural Republicans embrace or resist these conservative policy priorities may reveal whether education operates as an exception to the broader alignment between rural identity and Republican ideology in contemporary American politics.

We explore whether the views of rural Americans—and especially rural Americans who identify as Republicans—on a wide range of K-12 education issues are essentially synonymous with the views of self-identified Republicans more broadly, or whether the institutional and material realities of rural schooling continue to shape how citizens think about education policy and governance in ways that may run counter to party affiliation. Importantly, the focus is on citizens, not just voters, as schooling affects families, educators, and communities regardless of whether individuals turn out in elections. The rural-

urban divide is consequential not only because it shapes election outcomes, but because it changes how representation functions in rural places (Scala & Johnson, 2017; Gimpel et al., 2020). Mettler and Brown (2025) argue that contemporary rural politics is increasingly characterized by the dominance of the Republican Party, weakening the potential for elections to hold politicians accountable to the needs and desires of local citizens. This implication is especially relevant for education, where policy choices affect communities regardless of whether individuals vote, and where the preferences of less politically engaged citizens may still matter for coalition durability and for the legitimacy of local governance institutions.

### **The Erosion of Education's Exceptionalism and the Politics of Control**

For most of the twentieth century, education was governed through a form of institutional exceptionalism. School boards were mostly elected in off-cycle, nonpartisan elections that tended to dampen explicitly party-aligned conflict (Anzia, 2013; Henig, 2013). Even as the federal role expanded through the enforcement of desegregation, the implementation of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), and the passage of special education laws, schooling largely remained buffered from the partisan polarization that came to define most other domains of American politics in recent decades, and public opinion on education issues reflected this exceptionalism (Manna, 2006; McGuinn, 2006; Shapiro et al., 2021). Even attitudes toward who should control education were largely nonpartisan; Jacobsen and Saultz (2012) show that from the 1970s through 2010, most Americans expressed strong support for local control of schools.

However, both the institutional and attitudinal exceptionalism of education have eroded in recent years. Henig (2013) documents the decades-long drift of education from a single-purpose exceptional politics to general-purpose, partisan politics, and Houston (2024) reveals the resulting rise in partisan sorting on education issues since 2015. This change has not been driven primarily by shifts in who belongs to each party; rather, it reflects a meaningful share of individuals who have adjusted their educational attitudes to align with their partisan identities, regardless of the local circumstances that may have forged those attitudes initially. In this way, public opinion on education has become more like other social issues, such as abortion, guns, and immigration, even if some specific education issues remain less

polarized in absolute terms (Shapiro et al., 2021). State takeovers of local schools, culture-war legislation, and nationalized debates over schooling have made it harder for education to remain politically exceptional. While this form of education exceptionalism has eroded at the national and state levels, the possibility remains that a more localized version of exceptionalism persists, rooted not in professional norms but in material dependence on schools as community institutions.

As education becomes more politicized, questions about who should control schools take on renewed importance. The literature on American federalism shows that citizens hold meaningful preferences about the appropriate allocation of authority across levels of government, and these preferences shape how citizens interpret policy disputes and evaluate political actors (Schneider et al., 2011; Dinan & Heckelman, 2020; Wolak, 2016). However, these preferences are not orthogonal to partisanship. Dinan and Heckelman (2020) demonstrate that Republicans are consistently more supportive of decentralization than Democrats and that Republican federalism preferences are notably more stable across shifts in party control of the federal government. Democrats, by contrast, tend to embrace decentralization opportunistically when Republicans control Washington but favor centralization when Democrats are in power. Arnzen and Houston (2023) observe a similar pattern with respect to attitudes about control of education. Wolak (2016) argues that these dynamics are rooted in core values about government size and accountability rather than simple partisan heuristics. As conservative education reform moves toward state preemption and national voucher programs, it potentially collides with Republicans' traditional commitment to decentralization.

### **Rural Identity and Rural Schools**

Rural Americans experience both politics and education through a distinctive lens. A growing literature shows that rural identity is not just geographic but social and political, shaped by factors like place attachment, perceived marginalization, and distrust of metropolitan elites (Lyons & Utych, 2021; Diamond, 2023; Brown et al., 2021; Ollerenshaw, 2023). Additional recent work shows that rural identity is associated with skepticism toward experts and their institutions, including schools and universities (Trujillo, 2022; Krause et al., 2019). While most rural attitudes have become swept up in partisan

attitudes (Lin & Lunz Trujillo, 2024), rural school systems are structurally different. They serve fewer students, face higher fixed costs, struggle to recruit teachers, and depend heavily on state and federal funding streams (Malhoit, 2005; Brenner, 2019; Dobis et al., 2021; Arsen et al., 2021). Schools are often the largest employers and central civic institutions in rural communities (Schafft, 2016).

Often used to explain rural Americans' distrust of urban-centered policies and elites, "rural consciousness" could also help explain why education policy may be a wedge issue, breaking down the alignment between rurality and Republican identity (Cramer, 2016). In Cramer's account, rural identity involves more than attachment to place; it is about both injustice and disrespect. Rural individuals believe that power and resources flow toward cities and that government is urban and distant. Cramer articulates that many rural individuals express a belief that government policies are designed for and specifically benefit urban areas and the individuals who live in them. Many market-based education policies, such as charter schools and voucher programs, in fact, were designed with urban areas in mind—areas that have multiple schools from which to choose. As education politics has increasingly taken on a more nationalized tone (Henig et al., 2019; Shah et al., 2024), party priorities may force some dissonance for rural citizens. Put differently, rural residents may value local schools as community institutions while expressing skepticism toward national reforms and expert-driven governance that appear aligned with distant metropolitan priorities. This perspective suggests that rural residents, particularly rural Republicans, may experience education policy as a coalitional cross-pressure, where partisan identity pulls in one direction and attachment to local schools pulls in another.

These conditions shape public opinion in ways that cannot be easily reduced to ideology. Shakeel and Henderson (2019) show that rural residents are significantly less supportive of charter schools, vouchers, and tax-credit scholarships than urban and suburban residents, and that this gap persists even after accounting for demographics, party identification, ideology, satisfaction with schools. We build on their work by exploring the extent to which the rural/non-rural divide manifests differently within each party across a wider range of education issues.

### **How We Examine Rural and Partisan Differences in Education Attitudes**

To understand whether rural education attitudes simply reflect partisan identity or a separate dimension, we draw on data from the Education Next survey, a nationally representative annual survey of American adults that has tracked public opinion on K–12 education for nearly two decades. Following previous work (Houston, 2024; Arnzen & Houston, 2023), we focus on survey waves from 2015 through 2022 because these waves include detailed geographic identifiers for each respondent, allowing us to locate the school district where they live. Following Lin & Lunz Trujillo’s approach (2024), our analyses compare respondents across four groups defined by the intersection of place and partisanship: rural Democrats, rural Republicans, urban Democrats, and urban Republicans. Building on their analyses, we classify respondents as “rural” or “non-rural” based on the characteristics of the school districts in which they reside, drawing on National Center for Education Statistics locale classifications and related geographic measures. This approach allows us to focus specifically on the structural conditions of rural schooling environments, which are central to our argument about how local context may shape policy attitudes, and compare rural contexts directly to non-rural (i.e., suburban and urban) contexts.

We examine public opinion across a broad set of education issues that have become central to contemporary policy debates, including school choice policies, standards and testing, school evaluations, and education spending.<sup>1</sup> All measures are scaled from 1 to 5 with higher values indicating greater support for the policy or more favorable evaluations. Rather than focusing on any single issue, we explore patterns across issues, assessing whether rural differences emerge consistently or only in particular domains. In addition to policy attitudes, we examine views about education governance using data from the 2022 survey. We construct a measure of preferences for local, state, or federal control over education decisions as well as analyze which local actors respondents believe should have the greatest influence over schools. This allows us to assess whether rural communities differ not only in their education policy preferences but also in how they think about authority and decision-making in education.

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<sup>1</sup> We construct similar analyses as Houston (2024) and Arnzen & Houston (2023). Specific question wording and response options can be found at <https://www.educationnext.org/ednext-poll/>.

We begin by comparing average attitudes across the four place-party groups in 2022 (the most recent year of data) to establish baseline patterns. Next, to isolate the importance of rurality alone, we estimate regression models that account for differences in individual demographic characteristics, allowing us to assess whether observed gaps in general place-party attitudes reflect place-specific dynamics or underlying compositional differences along other dimensions. Finally, we examine changes over time to determine whether rural and non-rural Republicans have diverged as education politics has become more polarized.

### **Are Rural Education Attitudes Exceptional?**

Our analyses reveal an important intersection between rurality and partisanship when it comes to public opinion on K-12 education issues. While rural and non-rural copartisans often hold similar views, consistent and meaningful differences emerge on specific issues, particularly among Republicans, where national policy agendas conflict with the institutional realities of rural education.

Table 1 displays the weighted distribution of respondents across the four place-party categories by survey year, expressed as percentages of the national survey sample. Although the specific values vary from year to year, Democrats and Republicans living in rural school districts constitute approximately 25 percent of the sample. Within that 25 percent, Republicans consistently outnumber their Democratic counterparts.

**Table 1. Weighted percent distribution of respondents by place and party identity, 2015–2022**

Group	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022 <sup>a</sup>
Non-rural Democrats	43.2	42.7	44.3	45.5	47.2	46.9	45.2	50.3
Non-rural Republicans	31.8	31.3	29.3	30.1	28.0	29.0	31.4	33.9
Rural Democrats	11.3	11.5	10.8	10.6	10.7	9.7	9.4	6.1
Rural Republicans	13.6	14.4	15.7	13.9	14.0	14.3	14.0	9.7

*Source:* Education Next Survey, 2015–2022.

*Note:* Entries are weighted percentages within survey year and thus have margins of error not shown here.

<sup>a</sup> The 2022 urban/rural classifications use RUCA classifications rather than NCES locale classification, resulting in slight changes between which school districts count as urban and rural, and subsequently, the proportion of respondents.

Before turning to policy attitudes, it is important to establish that the data capture meaningful variation across both place and partisanship. The proportion of rural respondents affiliated with each party in the Education Next survey closely approximates the rates observed

in the data from the American National Election Survey used by Lin & Lunz Trujillo (2024).

Even after omitting non-partisans, our data captures a politically and geographically varied set of respondents, enabling comparisons across place and partisan identity groups.

*At First Glance, Partisanship—Not Rurality—Defines Education Attitudes*

Rural partisans hold similar attitudes as non-rural partisans on most education issues.

Table 2 presents weighted mean attitudes on fifteen education policy issues for each of the four place-party groups for the survey year 2022. Issues are ordered vertically by the magnitude of the general partisan gap (the average difference between Republicans and Democrats).

**Table 2. Education attitudes by party identity and rural/non-rural for 2022**

Issue	Republican				Democrat				Partisan Gap
	All	Rural	Non-rural	Rural - Non-rural	All	Rural	Non-rural	Rural - Non-rural	
Favorable Views of Teacher Unions	2.47	2.36	2.50	-0.13	3.59	3.52	3.60	-0.07	-1.12***
Support Homeschooling	3.83	4.02	3.78	0.24*	3.03	3.25	3.00	0.25	0.80***
Increase Teacher Salaries	3.63	3.59	3.64	-0.05	4.29	4.17	4.30	-0.13	-0.66***
Support Charter Schools	3.46	3.33	3.49	-0.16	2.83	2.74	2.84	-0.10	0.62***
Increase School Spending	3.34	3.23	3.37	-0.14	3.94	4.06	3.93	0.13	-0.60***
Grade for National Schools	1.66	1.58	1.68	-0.10	2.02	2.17	2.01	0.17*	-0.37***
Grade for Local Schools	2.29	2.14	2.33	-0.19	2.54	2.48	2.55	-0.07	-0.25***
Support Vouchers for Low-Income	2.91	2.94	2.91	0.03	3.16	3.22	3.15	0.07	-0.25*
Support Tax-Credit Scholarships	3.42	3.22	3.48	-0.26*	3.55	3.56	3.54	0.02	-0.12
Support Online Classes	3.52	3.83	3.43	0.40***	3.63	3.94	3.59	0.35**	-0.11
Support Standardized Testing	3.89	3.76	3.93	-0.16	3.95	3.76	3.97	-0.22	-0.06
Support Universal Vouchers	3.08	3.03	3.09	-0.06	3.08	3.13	3.08	0.05	-0.00

Source: Education Next Survey 2022.

Notes: Entries are weighted means of survey questions coded from 1 to 5, with higher values indicating stronger support, higher evaluations, or more favorable views.

The Rural - Non-rural and Partisan Gap columns report within-party differences in weighted means.

Issues are ordered by the absolute partisan gap.

Two-tailed tests of difference in means: \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Prior to adjusting for other characteristics, the differences between rural and non-rural respondents within parties are generally smaller than the overall partisan gaps and are often not statistically significant. In most cases, the estimates for rural Republicans and non-rural Republicans are quite similar, as are those for rural Democrats and non-rural Democrats. There are, however, some noteworthy exceptions. These exceptions tend to emerge most clearly on policies that directly related to the resources of rural schools. Both rural Republicans and

Democrats are more supportive of providing access to online classes, likely relating to the resource constraints that rural schools face. Rural schools can typically offer less variety of courses given their scale of staffing. Where other slight differences do exist, they tend to reflect differences in the intensity of support rather than differences in voter preferences. For example, rural Republicans still have supportive views of school choice, just slightly less than their non-rural counterparts. The primary take-away is that the rural/non-rural gaps within both parties are much smaller in magnitude than the partisan gaps across parties.

Across many education issues, political party divides public opinion, with Democrats and Republicans expressing broadly different views. Democrats and Republicans meaningfully diverge in their views of teachers unions, support for home schooling, increasing school spending, charter schools, teacher salaries, and evaluations of schools. These gaps align with the broad partisan polarization of American politics. Republicans hold less favorable views of teachers unions, are less supportive of increasing teacher salaries, are more supportive of charter schools, and have less favorable views of local and national schools. As of 2022, many education policy attitudes appear to have become politically polarized. Only a few issues exhibit relatively minimal partisan divergence: tax credit scholarships, online classes, standardized testing, and universal vouchers.

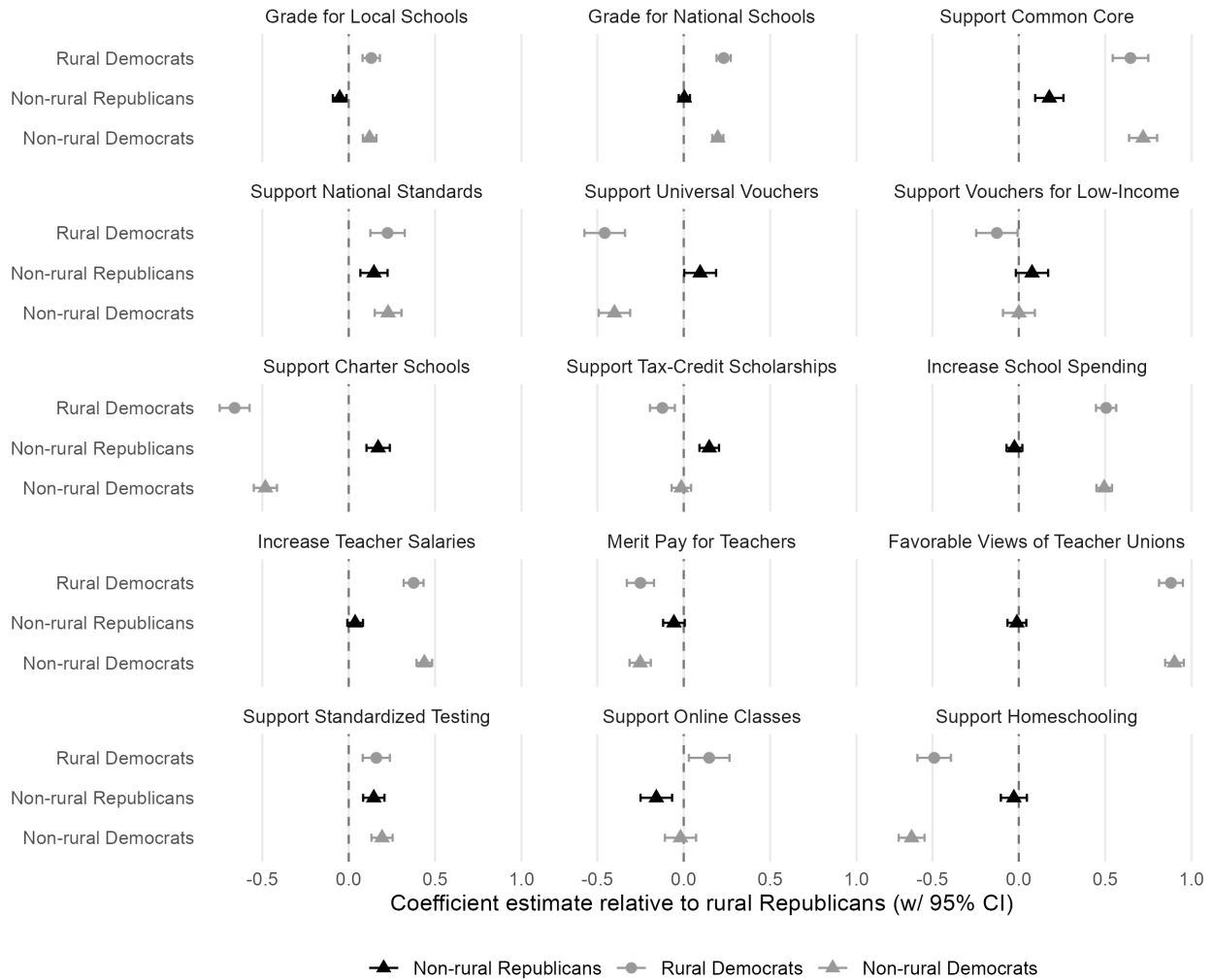
While Table 2 establishes the relative importance of partisanship compared to rurality, it offers a potentially misleading perspective on the rural/non-rural gaps themselves. Rurality is also correlated with a variety of other factors that are associated with individuals' views on education issues. To address this issue, we turn to multivariate regression analyses that allow us to observe the differences between rural and non-rural Republicans (and Democrats) after adjusting for some of those potentially confounding factors.

*After Controlling for Demographics, Rural/Non-Rural Republican Differences Emerge*

We next aggregate all eight years of data together, substantially increasing the sample size and allowing us to statistically control for a wider range of other variables. The results of these analyses reaffirm the importance of partisanship when predicting educational attitudes but also reveal a set of nontrivial rural/non-rural differences, particularly among Republicans. The figure below depicts the coefficients from a series of regression models adjusting for a consistent set of individual-level covariates, including income, gender, race, education, parental status, age, teacher status, and year fixed effects. The comparison group is rural Republicans, illustrating where there is clear divergence between rural and non-rural Republicans on education issues. Figure 1 essentially visualizes the intra-party differences between rural and non-rural copartisans, after teasing out the relative importance of other demographic factors.

**Figure 1. Differences in education attitudes relative to rural Republicans**

Linear regression models with demographic controls and year fixed effects



Source: Education Next Survey, 2015–2022

While the patterns in Table 2 illustrate broad rural and non-rural similarities within each party, the regression coefficients in Figure 1 tell a slightly different story. Broadly, across nearly all education issues, both non-rural and rural Democrats differ significantly from rural Republicans, even after accounting for demographic characteristics and survey year. This further underscores that partisanship is a strong factor in shaping public opinion toward education issues, and the coefficients are consistently positive or negative in ways that align with the descriptive partisan differences in Table 2.

Although partisan differences loom large in Figure 1, comparisons between rural and non-rural Republicans reveal several consistent cleavages. Rural Republicans are less supportive of charter schools, tax-credit scholarships, national standards, and standardized testing, and more supportive of online learning. These patterns align with the institutional realities of rural education systems. Despite the 2022 data illustrated in Table 2 suggesting that Republican educational attitudes appear largely nationalized, after accounting for demographic differences, rural Republicans appear to differ from their non-rural counterparts in many respects, suggesting something specific about rural needs and experiences.<sup>2</sup>

#### *Some Slight Rural/Non-Rural Gaps in Republican Attitudes Persist*

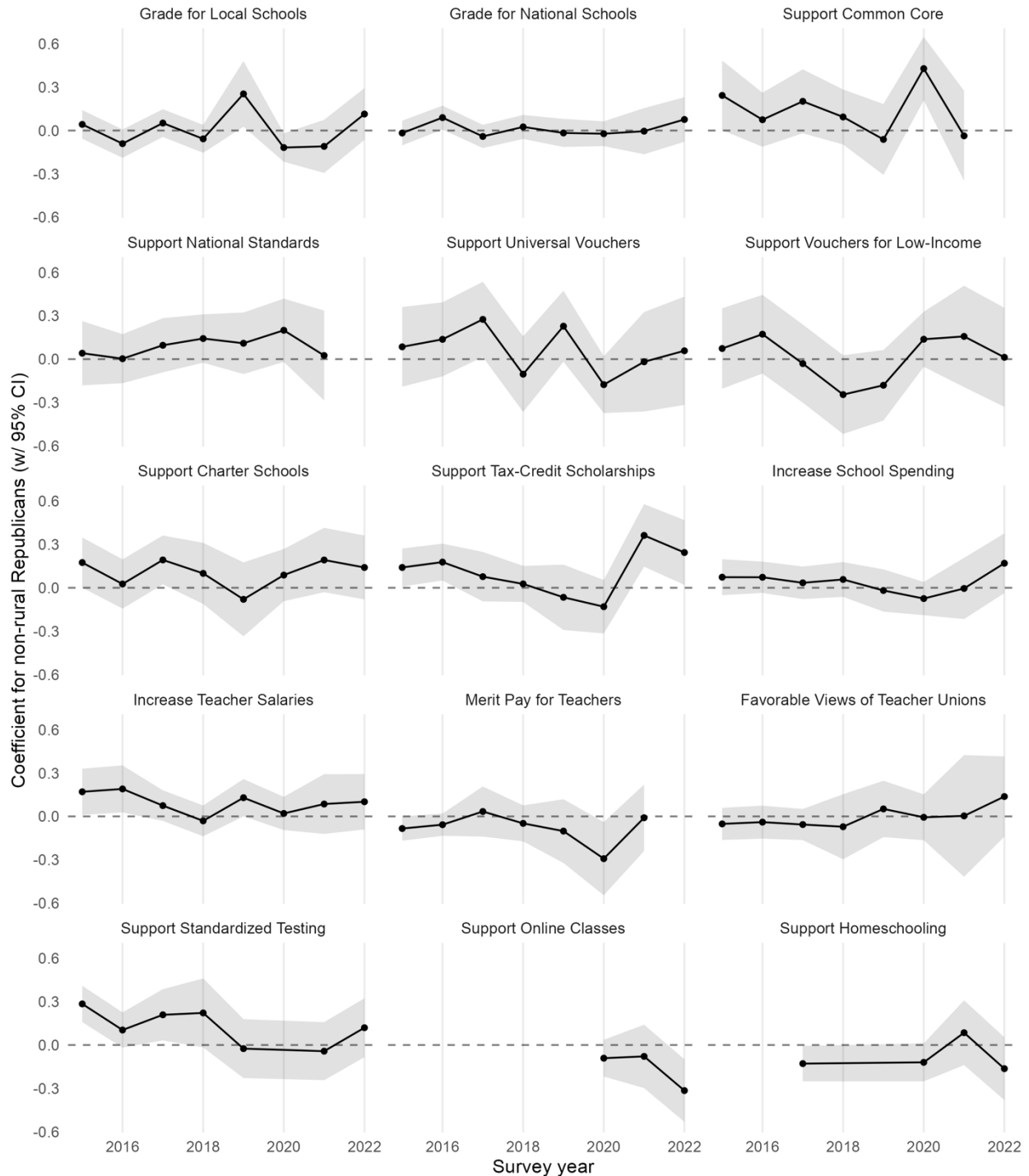
The cleavages between rural and non-rural Republicans in Figure 1 prompt questions about whether gaps have grown or shrunk between 2015 and 2022. To explore this, Figure 2 plots the coefficients for “non-rural Republican” from the models in Figure 1 (which estimate the gaps, on average, between rural and non-rural Republicans) for each year between 2015 to 2022. This figure illustrates where “rural” contributes to different educational attitudes after controlling for demographic factors and how that has changed over this time period. When the solid line deviates significantly from the dotted line, rural attitudes differ from non-rural Republican attitudes.

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<sup>2</sup> There are also statistically significant differences between these two groups when suburban respondents are left out of the analysis. These results can be seen in the supplementary materials on the authors’ webpage.

**Figure 2. Covariate adjusted differences between rural and non-rural Republicans**

Year-specific weighted coefficients; reference group (baseline) is rural Republicans



Source: Education Next Survey, 2015–2022

On many issues, rural and non-rural Republicans generally exhibit similar attitudes over time, showing little evidence of divergence even as education politics has become more

polarized (e.g., evaluation of national schools, views of teachers unions, attitudes toward school spending, increasing teacher salaries, etc.). However, in other cases, there are consistent differences. Rural Republicans exhibit generally lower support for Common Core, national standards, charter schools, tax credit scholarships, for example, with the solid line (non-rural Republicans) regularly appearing higher than the baseline for rural Republicans. On other issues, there are more episodic differences, such as attitudes toward vouchers, which hover both above and below the comparison point over the years. Such variation could be due to strength of political messaging and presence of such issues in political debates or could simply be the result of minor year-to-year fluctuations in survey sampling. Though the confidence intervals are somewhat larger for these year-by-year coefficient estimates, in general, these results further support narratives that portray rural Republicans as somewhat distinct from their non-rural counterparts on education policy.

*Preferences for Control Reflect Partisan Logics More than Place*

Next, we consider the intersection between rurality and partisanship with respect to the public’s views on school governance. Table 3 contains mean scores (both unadjusted as well as covariate-adjusted) on a localism index for each place-party group for 2022. Higher values indicate stronger preferences for local (rather than state or federal) control over education decisions.

**Table 3. Preferences for Local Control of Education as of 2022**

	Republicans				Democrats				Partisan Gap
	All	Rural	Non-rural	Rural – Non-rural	All	Rural	Non-rural	Rural - Non-rural	
Localism Index (Weighted)	3.35	3.39	3.34	0.06	2.74	2.88	2.72	0.16	0.61***
Localism Index (Regression Adjusted, Weighted)	3.39	3.44	3.34	0.10	2.80	2.90	2.71	0.19	0.59***

Source: 2022 Education Next Survey.

Notes: Entries are weighted means of the Localism Index, which averages preferences over which level of government should set standards, identify failing schools, and decide how to fix them.

The scale ranges from 1 to 5, with 5 indicating local government, 3 indicating state government, and 1 indicating federal government.

Regression-adjusted estimates come from weighted linear models controlling for income, gender, race/ethnicity, education, parental status, age, and teacher status.

The partisan gap indicates that Republicans are more supportive of local control than Democrats. We observe no rural/non-rural differences between attitudes toward local control, regardless of whether or not we control for other demographic characteristics. Republicans, regardless of place, consistently express stronger preferences for local control, reflecting broader ideological commitments rather than place-based experiences. In the case of attitudes toward which level of government should shape education, partisanship strongly shapes preferences about which level of government should control education, but rural context still shapes views about how authority should be distributed among local actors.

Though Republicans tend to express higher support for local control, there are various actors that have a say in education at the local level. Table 4 shows the results of a 2022 survey question asking which local actor should have the most say in education decisions. As above, the estimates are presented both as unadjusted estimates as well as covariate-adjusted estimates. The numbers account for the proportions of each group selecting the actor. For Republicans, parents emerge as the most preferred actors, aligning with recent conservative emphasis on parental authority. Democrats, on the other hand, show relatively greater support for teachers and school boards. These partisan differences again dominate any rural/non-rural differences within parties. The clearest rural/non-rural difference is that rural Republicans are less likely than non-rural Republicans to prefer school boards, and somewhat more likely to favor parents and teachers.

Across these analyses of public opinion on school governance, partisan identity emerges as the primary driver of education policy attitudes, with rural/non-rural context playing only a modest role at the margins. The gaps between rural/non-rural co-partisans are often rather small, even if they are statistically significant. The magnitude of partisan gaps on most education issues is almost always larger than any partisan-place gaps.

**Table 4. Who should have the most say in local education as of 2022?**

Actor	Republicans				Democrats				Partisan Gap
	All	Rural	Non-rural	Rural – Non-rural	All	Rural	Non-rural	Rural – Non-rural	
<i>Weighted Analyses</i>									
Teachers	20.0	24.0	18.8	5.2	36.7	41.8	36.1	5.7	-16.7***
School Boards	22.3	14.2	24.7	-10.4**	28.8	27.1	29.0	-1.9	-6.4***
School Administrators	12.4	14.5	11.7	2.8	20.5	18.3	20.7	-2.4	-8.1***
Parents	44.7	45.6	44.4	1.2	12.2	12.8	12.2	0.7	32.4***
Mayors	0.7	1.6	0.4	1.2	1.8	0.0	2.1	-2.1	-1.2
<i>Covariate-Adjusted, Weighted Analyses</i>									
Teachers	19.9	21.8	18.1	3.6	39.6	42.3	36.9	5.4	-19.7***
School Boards	20.6	16.3	24.9	-8.6*	27.9	27.8	28.1	-0.3	-7.3***
School Administrators	13.6	15.1	12.0	3.2	19.3	18.1	20.5	-2.5	-5.7***
Parents	44.4	44.6	44.3	0.3	12.3	11.8	12.7	-0.9	32.2***
Mayors	1.4	2.2	0.7	1.5	0.9	0.1	1.7	-1.7	0.5

*Source:* 2022 Education Next Survey.

*Notes:* Entries are weighted percentages selecting each actor as having the most say in local education.

Regression-adjusted estimates come from weighted linear probability models controlling for income, gender, race/ethnicity, education, parental status, age, and teacher status.

The Partisan Gap column reports Republican minus Democrat differences in weighted percentages.

### Where Rural Still Matters: The Boundaries of Nationalization

With respect to their views on many education issues, rural Republicans are largely indistinguishable from their non-rural co-partisans. For the most part, political party appears to be one of the dominant forces shaping individuals' education attitudes, regardless of geographic context. This pattern is consistent with broader accounts of political polarization and nationalization, which show that individuals increasingly align their issue positions with party affiliation rather than local context (Brown et al., 2021; Mettler & Brown, 2025). Education politics, much like most other major issue areas, has been swept up in the broader partisan and ideological realignment defining contemporary American politics (Scala & Johnson, 2017; Houston, 2024). However, the findings presented here suggest that while education politics are increasingly structured by partisanship overall, they are also shaped by place in predictable and theoretically meaningful ways. Though partisanship provides strong signals, place still matters at the margins in ways that could remain relevant for close elections and the creation and maintenance of influential political coalitions.

The alignment between rural identity and Republican positions is not total, and its limits are most visible on policies that directly affect the viability of rural schools. Put differently, Republican identity appears to shape education attitudes for most rural Republicans—but there are a small, discernible subset of issues for which partisanship is less determinative. For example, on average, rural residents are less supportive of charter schools and standardized testing. Although these differences are modest and sometimes sensitive to statistical interpretation, this pattern holds for both Republicans and Democrats and they persist across time and issues. While not large enough to overturn the broader pattern of partisan polarization, these rural/non-rural differences may nonetheless matter politically given the increasing centrality of education to elections. In close electoral contests, these issues could be capable of fracturing partisan coalitions or sinking state-wide referendums on school choice policies. Indeed, the 2024 general election offers a recent illustration: despite widespread Republican electoral success, voters in Nebraska, Colorado, and Kentucky rejected ballot initiatives aimed at expanding school choice—results many observers attributed to resistance from rural voters, including rural Republicans (e.g., Baxter et al., 2025; Jimenez, 2024). Our findings add some support to these claims: while “rural” may increasingly mean “Republican” in American politics broadly, some education issues appear to have the potential to soften the influence of partisanship. Specifically, issues that invoke the material differences between rural and non-rural schools may generate political cross-pressures.

While Lin and Lunz Trujillo (2024) find rural policy attitudes largely disappear once partisanship is taken into account, leading them to conclude that “rural” often functions as a proxy for “Republican,” our findings complicate that claim. For many education issues, rural attitudes do align closely with Republican attitudes, consistent with the polarization and

nationalization of education politics. Yet the small attitudinal differences on some policies that structurally disadvantage rural schools suggests that this alignment is not as dominant in education as it is in many other areas of policy. In fact, identifying these education-specific deviations might even serve as the basis for reforming political coalitions capable of resisting national polarization.

Though often not thought of as central to American politics, education policy has direct and uneven material consequences across communities and, at an even more granular level, families and children. Rural schools operate under conditions that differ markedly from those in suburban and urban districts, including smaller enrollments, higher per-pupil costs, longer transportation routes, and fewer viable schooling alternatives (Malhoit, 2005; Brenner, 2019; Arsen et al., 2021). Market-based reforms such as charter schools and vouchers, which rely on multiple schooling options, often map poorly onto these contexts, elevating rural residents' potential frustrations with policies designed for more metropolitan contexts. Some rural residents may evaluate such policies not only through ideological commitments but also through their implications for community and institutional survival.

Given this misalignment, the modest but consistent skepticism rural Republicans express toward certain conservative education reforms might be understood as a form of "rural education exceptionalism." Unlike the earlier national exceptionalism that insulated education from partisan conflict (Henig, 2013), this rural exceptionalism is rooted in rural communities' distinctive material and civic reliance on local public schools. Moreover, because rural schools are often among the largest employers and central community institutions, policies perceived as threatening to them may very well generate cross-pressures for rural Republicans.

This interpretation also helps explain the failure of several recent statewide referendum efforts to expand charter schools or vouchers in states with large rural populations. Although these policies are typically framed as ideologically conservative and aligned with Republican priorities, they appear not to resonate with many rural voters, including rural Republicans. Rural voters may break from party cues, abstain, or oppose policies that conflict with local public education—even while still remaining aligned with the Republican Party on most other issues.

These dynamics also speak to broader debates about rural representation and democratic accountability. Mettler and Brown (2025) argue that rural politics is increasingly dominated by single-party control, which can weaken accountability and reduce the responsiveness of elected officials to local needs. Education may be one of the few domains where this dynamic can be disrupted. While education politics may be increasingly nationalized, they are not placeless. The persistence of even small rural/non-rural differences, especially among Republicans, suggests that local institutional realities will continue to shape how national policy agendas are received. For education reformers, this presents both a constraint and an opportunity. Policies that align with rural realities may strengthen coalitions, while those that do not may encounter consequential resistance.

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