

Demography Seems To Be Destiny Again: How Population Dynamics Influence Populist Narratives

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One common narrative about neo-populism is that it stems from the failure of globalization, where liberal elites were more interested in forcing a multicultural agenda on every community than spreading the economic benefits to disadvantaged areas. It is no doubt that rural areas have been seeing fewer of the economic benefits while more of the political/cultural anxiety of globalization, and as such, the above narrative finds fertile grounds.

At the core of this issue, similar to many other examples of contested social change, we can find fundamental demographic dynamics. These dynamics, particularly those about changes in population size and composition, have a strong interplay with the urban-rural continuum, and often feed into both populist and progressive narratives. These could manifest themselves at local, national, and global levels.

Over the 20th century, but especially after the Second World War, rural areas have largely been experiencing population decline. This coincided with two fundamental changes: one in economic structures, namely the decline of labor-intensive agriculture and other extractive economies, and the other in residential preferences, the shift towards favoring urban (or suburban) amenities. Certain population trends, such as counter-urbanization, or selective rural revivals in areas with rich natural amenities and tourism development have changed the fortunes of some communities, but by and large, rural areas in developed countries have not been the beneficiaries of recent socio-economic trends.

Similarly, while globalization was originally portrayed as a cultural advancement, connecting the world, the narrative on the dark side of social change has resonated in rural areas quite well. Struggling with economic challenges and declining services, as well as with aging in place and the departure of younger people, many rural areas felt that certain changes in population composition, often in the form of growing multiculturalism, creates an additional threat for the existing way of life. Populist narratives were very successful exploiting the urban view on rural areas, which often exposed itself as seemingly out of touch, arrogant, and condescending toward rural people and communities. The roots of these views were partly the same: observing decades of rural decline can easily make an urbanite feel that rural places are on the verge of going out of business, and their only utility is the “rural gaze.”

This paper addresses the interplay between rural population dynamics and the conceptual narratives of populism to answer the question to what extent was rural fragility caused by demographic dynamics. In order to understand the challenges that rural places face in the populist, post-truth world, we have to deconstruct how these places are portrayed in the discourse and what forces shape these perceptions. Specific attention will be given to long term population decline, the impact of urbanization (and suburbanization where applicable), the changing racial/ethnic composition of rural populations, and the dynamics of rural aging through appropriate statistics and case studies.