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The Grocery Cart Divide: How Rural and Urban America Sort Themselves

What people search for, eat, and wear maps the rural-urban split almost as cleanly as the ballot does.

by **David Schultz** August 5, 2026

We hear constantly that rural and urban America have grown apart. The [2024 presidential map](#) made the point in the usual way, a sea of red countryside around dense blue cities, with roughly 90% of counties

shifting toward Donald Trump. That divide is real, and it is well documented. What gets less attention is how far down into daily life it reaches. Over the past several months I went looking for it not in voting records but in grocery searches, brand footprints, and the small choices people make without thinking of them as political at all.

I tested 21 consumer preferences, retail patterns, and demographic measures against county and state level returns from 2024, combining relative search interest from Google Trends with the election results. Nineteen of the 21 were statistically significant. Taken together they describe a rural-urban split that is not just about who governs, but about how people live, eat, and shop. That distinction matters for anyone who cares about rural communities, because it shapes how campaigns court them and which businesses decide to invest in them.

The food signals were the strongest. The single best predictor in the whole study was a state's relative search interest in tofu versus pork rinds, which by itself explained 72% of the variation, or the difference, in the vote. Searches for gravy versus pesto came next, then Velveeta versus brie, each explaining roughly two thirds.

The pattern was consistent and, frankly, not surprising to anyone who has lived in a small town: shelf stable and homemade foods such as Velveeta, SPAM, Miracle Whip, biscuits and gravy, and no-bean chili tracked rural, Republican leaning places. Refrigerated and imported foods such as brie, pesto, prosciutto, and avocado toast tracked dense, Democratic leaning ones. For the sake of this analysis, rural is defined as counties outside of the Office and Management and Budget's Metropolitan Statistical Areas.

Other markers followed the same rural-urban line. Searches for Wranglers ran rural while Levis ran urban, a split that alone explained close to half the variance. Interest in NASCAR tracked rural Republican margins about as cleanly as public radio listenership tracked urban Democratic ones. Sweet tea mapped the rural South so precisely that the twelve states searching for it most all voted the same way. Homeschooling searches tilted rural. None of these is a stereotype imposed from outside. They are the visible texture of a regional culture, the same way a county fair or a hunting season is.

The retail map drew the clearest line of all. Counties with a Whole Foods voted Democratic at about 58%, compared with roughly 30% in counties without one, and barely 2% of the counties Trump carried had a store at all. Lululemon, the same. Meanwhile Dollar General, which has spread across rural and small town America by the thousands, was the near mirror image, with the vast majority of its counties going Republican. Chick-fil-A, Cracker Barrel, and Waffle House leaned the same direction. Where a chain chooses to build is, in effect, a bet on a kind of community, and those bets sort almost perfectly along the rural-urban seam.

Underneath all of it sits one variable: education. The Economic Innovation Group has shown how tightly a county's share of college graduates now tracks its politics, and my data agrees. The college degree share was

the strongest demographic predictor, explaining about 31% of the variance and underlying nearly every food and retail pattern. National chains follow the graduates into metro areas, and the graduates lean Democratic. Rural counties, which retain a larger share of residents whose skills and livelihoods never required a four year degree, are left on the other side of that line, often with fewer of the retail options urban readers take for granted.

One finding cuts against a common assumption, and rural readers will recognize why it matters. Poverty rate predicted almost nothing, because rural white poverty and urban minority poverty roughly cancel each other out. Hardship is not the dividing line between red and blue America. Plenty of struggling places vote each way. The dividing line is cultural and educational, a matter of identity and way of life rather than simple economics, which is exactly why it has proven so stubborn.

This has real consequences as the 2026 midterms approach. The same consumer data I analyzed is the raw material campaigns now used for microtargeting, building voter profiles from commercial and behavioral records to tailor messages household by household. Rural voters should understand that their search histories, store loyalty cards, and brand preferences are increasingly read as political signals by people who have never set foot in their county. The data broker industry that feeds this machine operates with little oversight, a privacy concern that ought to unsettle people regardless of how they vote.

There is a quieter consequence for rural economic development, and it deserves more honesty than it usually gets. If consumer preference and community identity are this entangled, then the businesses willing to invest in a place are not making a politically neutral calculation. A specialty grocer or boutique retailer is betting on an urban, college educated customer base, which is one reason those storefronts so rarely appear in rural downtowns. The chains that do invest in rural America, the dollar stores and farm suppliers and quick service restaurants, are betting on the customers who are actually there.

That cuts two ways for rural leaders weighing how to grow their local economies. One path is to recruit businesses suited to the community that exists, playing to the real strengths and tastes of the place rather than chasing an urban template that will not take root. The other is to recognize that new businesses can themselves nudge a community's culture over time, for better or worse, since a way of life and the storefronts that serve it tend to shift together. Neither path is obviously right. But rural officials should at least know that a recruitment pitch mismatched to the county's character is a long shot no matter how generous the incentives.

The point of all this is not that brie searches decide elections, or that rural tastes are something to be corrected. It is that the rural-urban divide we keep describing in political terms runs deeper than politics. It lives in the grocery aisle, the clothing rack, and the search bar, and it reflects communities and identities built up over generations. For those who want to understand rural America, or to serve it, the lesson is to take that culture

seriously on its own terms rather than treating it as a problem to be solved. The shopping cart, it turns out, has been telling us where we stand all along.

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