

RURAL CONSERVATISM: THEN AND NOW

How the rise of social media has influenced the degree of conservatism in rural areas of the United States



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Abstract

When thinking about rural areas in the United States, stereotypes such as Hillbillies and Rednecks often come to mind, as well as the idea that the degree of conservatism in these areas is considerably higher than in urban areas of the country. This thesis aims to find an answer to the question of how the rise of social media in the late 20th century has influenced the degree of rural conservatism in the United States. In order to achieve this, two time frames will be analyzed and compared to see whether the degree of rural conservatism has changed over the years. The first time frame that will be discussed, the post-Civil Rights era, is characterized by the development and rise of television in the American home. This made communication broader and less personal. The second time frame, the post-Cold War era, characterized by the rise of the internet and social media, made communication more personal, but that came with several implications such as news deserts and echo chambers. Taking into account these factors, it could be argued that the rise of social media did have an influence on the degree of rural conservatism in the United States; however, this degree did not drastically change.

Keywords: rural, conservatism, United States, social media

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Introduction

When thinking about rural America, typical stereotypes such as Hillbillies and Rednecks living on big farms or in small towns instantly come to mind. These areas of the United States are characterized by the redness they give off during election time due to the popularity of the Republican Party. The degree of conservatism in these areas is exceptionally higher than that in urban areas of the United States. Rural Americans often tend to be suspicious of urban areas in the United States, because they feel as if their way of life is threatened by the urban way of life (Knoke & Henry 52). The Republican Party, also promoting conservative messages, is therefore very much present in these areas. All so-called rural states, states where rural areas make up more than half of the entire state, voted for the Republican party during the 2020 federal elections. But how has this come about, and how did it change over time?

This thesis aims to answer whether the rise of social media has influenced the degree of conservatism in rural areas of the United States over time. This will be done by comparing two time frames, namely the post-Civil Rights era, comprising the years 1968 until 1989, and the post-Cold War era, comprising the years 1989 until 2008. It will be guided by two sub-questions that will be dealt with in chapters II and III, and in total it is composed of four chapters that each contributes a piece that will answer this question. Chapter I serves as a background chapter, consisting of an explanation of the context, an outline of the theoretical framework, the used methodology, a review of relevant literature, and an explanation of relevant concepts that this thesis will touch upon. Chapter II, then, will analyze the rise of television and other ways news was obtained during the post-Civil Rights era. It will also reflect this on rural conservatism at that time, with the help of the first sub-question, namely, how did rural areas in the United States during the post-Civil Rights era obtain news? The development of the internet and social media, as well as the accompanying problems that these developments bring about, in combination with rural conservatism, will be reflected in

chapter III. The second sub-question will guide it, namely, how has social media developed in rural areas of the United States during the post-Cold War era? Chapter IV, lastly, will delve deeper into the underlying factors concerning globalization and social media and how these factors have contributed to the degree of rural conservatism. This thesis aims to fill a gap in the existing literature of the field. There has been literature written about rural conservatism in both time frames, and social media has been taken into account in several pieces of literature. However, there is no literature that deals with two time frames and compares the degree of rural conservatism in the respective time frames.

Chapter I – Background

This chapter will cover the background regarding the topic of this thesis and will discuss the context surrounding rural areas in the United States and conservatism, as well as a justification of research methods. The chapter is divided into five sections, the first covering context, the second discussing the theoretical framework, the third will elaborate on methodology, the fourth will provide a review of relevant literature, and the last will provide a chapter overview. The components together aim to form a clear guide through the rest of the chapters.

1.1. Context

Over the years, along with the urban development of the United States, a trend of conservatism in rural America has arisen. All fifteen states where rural residents make up at least half of the total population voted Republican in the 2020 federal elections, confirming the degree of conservatism (“2020 Presidential Election Results”). Rural American voters traditionally feel an aversion against urban areas in the United States since rural and urban lifestyles significantly differ (Knoke and Henry 52). Different people with different views decide to live in different areas, as educated people are more likely to find jobs in urban areas. In contrast, less educated people are more likely to find jobs in rural areas. The reality is that less educated people remain in rural parts while more educated people move away (Maxwell).

In order to research whether the rise of social media during the post-Cold War era has influenced the degree of conservatism in rural areas of the United States compared to the post-Civil Rights era, it is crucial to discuss already existing literature in this field. Professor of Political Science Diana Owen has researched the transformation the American media landscape has undergone since the 1980s. In “The Past Decade and Future of Political Media” (2019), Owen discusses how the place where Americans get their news and information about

politics has shifted away from traditional media such as television and printed newspapers to online news and news apps on smartphones (Owen 4). She even predicts that, as people rely more and more on online news, it may overtake television news as the primary source of news obtaining (6). People have two ways of obtaining online news, deliberately through online subscriptions to news sites or accidentally, when they come across it on their social media timelines (4). Due to the emergence of social media, accessing information about politics has become significantly less complicated, leading to the opportunity for more direct communication between politicians and the public. Another scholar, Ralph Schroeder, elaborates on this more direct communication by stating that there are more formats available, such as Twitter and Facebook, where the public can directly communicate with other voters and politicians themselves (Schroeder 35). Schroeder is, however, not only optimistic about digital media on the rise in the American political field. Politics in the United States are shaped by what Schroeder calls a “political gridlock” in the two-party system (32). Political news often concentrates on one of the two dominant political parties, which could have contributed to the polarization of the two ideologies (Schroeder 32; Baum and Groeling 359). Another scholar that is important to mention here is Turgay Yerlikaya, who, in his article “Social Media and Fake News in the Post Truth Era” (2020), argues that digital media enables individuals to express themselves in a free environment since social media platforms are free from control or legal boundaries (Yerlikaya 178). This ties in with ‘Section 230,’ a provision in the Communications Decency Act added in 1996 that states that big tech companies, such as Facebook or Twitter, are not liable for harmful content one of their users posts on their sites. This means that these companies cannot be sued over the content that can be found on their sites (Tracy). This makes it more attractive for far-right and populist politicians to express themselves freely towards their constituency (Yerlikaya 180).

This thesis touches upon several key concepts that are important to clarify what is meant by them. As the first of four main concepts, I would like to discuss is the geographical phenomenon of rural. The United States Census Bureau defines rural areas as places where the population count is no higher than 2,500 people. A rural state, then, is a state in which at least fifty percent of the inhabitants live in a classified rural area (“Rural America”). The second concept that is significant to discuss is conservatism. Throughout this thesis, conservatism will be a returning term, as the influence of social media on this concept will be researched. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines conservatism as a political philosophy based on preserving tradition and social stability (“Conservatism”). In rural areas, people tend to be less educated and have fewer opportunities than in the city, which could lead to them valuing the key conservative aspects such as tradition, hierarchy, and property more than in urban areas. There has been some discussion about how conservatism could best be defined (Alexander 215). The definition that is utilized in this thesis, however, is by far the most used. Another concept that is important to elaborate on in light of this thesis is the concept of social media. The Merriam-Webster dictionary states that social media are forms of electronic communication through which users can create communities to share, among other things, information and ideas with each other (“Social Media”). Even though the research behind social media started earlier, the first actual social media platform, Six Degrees, was launched in 1997. From here, the concept of social media skyrocketed in popularity, leading to people nowadays not being able to live without the different platforms. As social media became more and more popular, it made its way to politics as well, beginning with the Obama campaign in 2008, all the way to President Donald Trump twittering every day (“How Social Media Is Shaping Political Campaigns”). In a recent New York Times interview, President Barack Obama mentions how American political identities have become more polarized than before, which is, in part, due to the infrastructure and the isolation of American media (Klein). Within

one generation, social media has grown to be one of the most important news outlets for the public and politicians alike. Scholar Manadeep visualizes this shift by analyzing the concept of social media from the 1980s until the 2010s. It is clear how, over the years, social media shifted further away from television and newspaper news due to the fact that every couple of years a new, better developed social media platform was launched, making it more and more accessible to the public (Manadeep 11). The last concept that is significant to mention here is the theory of mediatization of politics, as this will form a framework throughout the thesis. The following section will elaborate on this theory; however, it is also significant to briefly mention it here. The main idea of the mediatization of politics was introduced by Swedish political scientist Kent Asp and discusses the phenomenon where media becomes increasingly influential within the field of politics up to the point where it becomes the most important source for obtaining information. In this thesis, the concept of the mediatization of politics will be used as a framework that will clarify the degree of reliability on online news.

1.2. Theoretical framework

As briefly mentioned before, this thesis will be guided by the so-called mediatization theory. In particular, the idea of the mediatization of politics will form an effective framework on which the research is built. Therefore, in this part of the chapter, the theory will be analyzed and further elaborated on, in order to establish a clear theoretical framework to build upon.

Different kinds of scholars have discussed the concept of mediatization, and it applies to various kinds of academic fields. The general concept of mediatization is described as a process of social change in which media become increasingly influential in different aspects of society to the point that one cannot go without it (Strömbäck and Esser 4). Being a process of social change, mediatization could be compared to globalization and individualization in the sense that these, too, have become gradually integrated into society (4). For this thesis, a specific form of mediatization will be applied, namely the concept of the mediatization of

politics. Swedish political scientist Kent Asp introduced the mediatization of politics and political life, defining it as a political system highly influenced by the mass media in their coverage of politics (Asp 359). The definition, in essence, remains the same. It is, however, slightly more detailed, as it discusses the specific aspect of society. A significant requirement for something to be regarded as part of the mediatization of politics is that the media has to be the most important source for information about politics (Strömbäck and Esser 22).

Mediatization of politics in this day and age cannot exist without social media. These new forms of media give rise to new opportunities for political organizations and actors to benefit from, which causes a shift within the media environment, as these organizations and actors start utilizing new media for strategic political purposes (Schulz 57). Many media platforms are not directly involved in politics; they provide a space where the public is able to express their opinion and be directly in contact with political actors (63). It is, therefore, the case that political actors depend less on the classical media such as newspapers and television broadcasts, and they could decide for themselves what they publish and when they feel it is the right time (68).

The mediatization of politics theory corresponds with this thesis in the way that the increased influence of the media plays a significant role in this research. Through the concept of mediatization, the differences between the degree of conservatism and the influence of the media on this degree during the post-Civil Rights era and the post-Cold War era could become apparent. Therefore, the accompanying hypothesis is that as the degree of mediatization in politics increased over time, so did the degree of conservatism in rural areas of the United States.

1.3. Methodology

In this section, the methodology used in this thesis will be discussed and justified. The chosen methodology will provide an effective framework to reach a fitting conclusion to the research question.

The methodology chosen regarding this research will be a qualitative one with a focus on textual analysis. The two timeframes that have been chosen, the post-Civil Rights era and the post-Cold War era, will be discussed separately in chapters II and III. Chapter IV will delve deeper into underlying factors that have led to the issues dealt with in chapter III. Two time frames have been chosen because it is a convenient delineation regarding literature, and it makes comparing the degree of conservatism more straightforward. The particular starting and ending points of the chosen eras have been chosen due to significant historical events that happened in that year to provide a clear demarcation per era. The post-Civil Rights era discussed here runs from 1968, the year the Fair Housing Act was signed until 1989, the year the Berlin Wall was brought down. The post-Cold War era discussed in this thesis runs from 1989 until 2008, when President Barack Obama was elected President of the United States. These historical events are not necessarily connected to the subject of this thesis, they are purely meant to make a clear demarcation. It is also important to note here that these time frames are not set in stone; they are meant in this thesis to provide two straightforward eras to compare and are not officially recognized eras.

The literature on each era will be closely read and analyzed on how rural residents of the United States were able to obtain news during these specific areas, especially regarding the available media in the respective eras. This way, a pattern of differences will appear regarding the obtaining and availability of news in rural areas of the United States that will form a clear guide towards answering the research question. A qualitative research method was chosen instead of a quantitative research method because there are so many different kinds of news outlets and broadcasts that it would not be beneficial to analyze them all while

literature was already written about it. It would, furthermore, be an uneven comparison, as for the post-Cold War era social media outlets could be analyzed, which would not be possible for the post-Civil Rights era, as social media did not exist yet. This way, an analysis about the degree of conservatism in rural United States and how social media influenced this degree cannot come about. Through qualitative research, however, this can be made possible through impartial literature on how rural residents in the United States were able to obtain news in the two different time frames and how this shifted over time, which would be more effective for answering the established research question.

Aside from the main research question that aims to answer how social media has influenced conservatism in rural United States, two sub-questions will also be dealt with that will enforce the essence of the main question. The first question will be dealt with in the next chapter and aims to analyze how rural areas in the United States were able to obtain news during the post-Civil Rights era. Then, a sub-question that aims to answer how social media has developed in rural areas of the United States during the post-Cold War era will be discussed in the third chapter. The fact that these sub-questions each discuss one of the time frames from the main research question will give rise to a combination of the answers to these questions and form a guide towards the answer to the main research question.

1.4. Literature Review

This section will analyze the academic discussion on conservatism in combination with news in rural areas of the United States, aiming to establish a framework of knowledge already existing in the field. Some of the discussed literature here was already briefly mentioned in the concept section. This section, however, aims to provide a description of only the most relevant sources for this thesis.

The first time frame that will be discussed has three important pieces of literature about news and conservatism in the United States. Simonson et al. (2013) aim to address ideas

and practices regarding communication history. A history of, among others, television, radio broadcasting, politics, or audiences regarding media and communication is provided and can be seen as a significant piece of literature concerning the development of media in the United States. Where Simonson et al. provide a clear yet broad overview of communication history, especially about media, Winston (2012) addresses a more detailed history of media due to the inclusion of religion in American news. This article discusses how religion has become a significant part of daily news coverage in the United States and explained when and how this came about. These two handbooks agree on the time period regarding the rise of television broadcasting, namely around the late 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, when television became an indispensable American household item. Winston also mentions that societal changes during the post-Civil Rights era gave rise to an increase in religion and conservatism in politics (12). In an earlier piece of literature about rurality in combination with conservatism, Knoke and Henry (1977) acknowledge these societal changes by discussing three aspects of rural political behavior during this time, namely radicalism, conservatism, and apathy, conservatism being the most important aspect for this thesis. Simonson et al. primarily form a framework in this thesis regarding media development during the post-Civil Rights movement. Winston and Knoke and Henry both mention conservatism in their works and their views on the degree of conservatism during this period of time are in accordance with each other.

The second period that will be discussed also has some significant literature, especially due to the introduction of social media. As aforementioned, Simonson et al. provide a clear overview of the history of communication media, and the rise of social media from the 1990s onwards is part of this. A piece of literature that is highly significant regarding the connection between conservatism and social media is Owen (2019), analyzing two transformations in media significant for this thesis, namely a shift in how and where people

obtain political information and the increase in so-called “news deserts” (Owen 1). This will be elaborated on in chapter III. Owen states that social media has grown to become the major source of political news obtaining in the United States (4). Schroeder (2018), on the other hand, mentions that even though much political communication is moving online, the majority of political input still takes place through newspapers and television (Schroeder 30). Due to the emergence of news deserts, however, political communication through newspapers and television becomes more and more difficult for rural Americans. This gives rise to so-called “echo chambers,” groups of like-minded people that find themselves in a bubble where they do not come across other opinions, leading to them only believing the information from their bubble as the truth (Khosravinik 63).

Different perspectives are being discussed by different scholars, making the field diverse. Not all scholars mention phenomena such as news deserts or echo chambers, but combining the two is incredibly relevant and significant for this thesis. From this literature review, it is important to take into account the development from television towards the internet and social media and how this shift caused political communication to become more personal but also more prone to misuse and manipulation.

1.5. Chapter overview

This final section of the chapter will go over the remaining chapters of this thesis and provide an overview of how the thesis is built up.

As this chapter has provided background information regarding conservatism in rural United States, as well as an explanation of the theoretical framework that will be used and a justification regarding the methodology used in this thesis, the following chapter will cover the obtaining of news in rural areas of the United States during the post-Civil Rights era, covering the years 1968 until 1989. As social media had not yet emerged in this era, other sources such as newspapers, radio, and television were dominant. When the obtaining of news

in the post-Civil Rights era has been established, chapter III will examine the obtaining of news in rural areas of the United States in an era where social media grew out to be highly popular, namely the post-Cold War era, covering the years 1989 until 2008. It will also analyze the phenomena of news deserts and echo chambers in relation to rural conservatism. Chapters II and III alike will focus on available news outlets and analyze how this has impacted rural residents in both eras, respectively. Combining and reflecting on chapters II and III, chapter IV will delve deeper into two underlying factors that could have contributed to a change in the degree of rural conservatism in the United States, namely the third wave of globalization and the development of social media. The third wave of globalization has brought about the rise of algorithms and revenue models, which could influence people's online behavior. In addition, the development of social media has caused the emergence of news deserts and echo chambers, both negatively impacting the way rural Americans could obtain news.

The final part of this thesis will provide a conclusion, stating that social media has influenced the degree of conservatism in rural areas of the United States, mainly due to the fact that social media has caused rural Americans to become a victim of revenue models and advertising schemes used by big tech companies. This leads to them ending up in a so-called echo chamber, a phenomenon that will be elaborated on later in this thesis. Echo chambers have led to rural Americans only coming into contact with like-minded people, giving rise to their opinions becoming more and more extreme. Previously, news was brought to them unilaterally in the sense that they could only listen but not directly react to it, so they would keep their opinions to themselves. Through this direct contact with others, rural residents are able to enforce their conservative values and project them onto others, increasing the degree of conservatism in these areas.

Chapter II – Rural America and News in the post-Civil Rights Era, 1968-1989

This chapter will be dedicated to the post-Civil Rights era and aims to answer the first sub-question: How did rural areas in the United States during the post-Civil Rights era obtain news? As aforementioned, the post-Civil Rights era comprises the years 1968 until 1989, from the signing of the Fair Housing Act until the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The chapter is divided into two sections; section 2.1 establishes what is meant by ‘rural’ areas in the United States and discusses the available news outlets during the post-Civil Rights era. Section 2.2, then, will analyze how rural residents in the United States were able to obtain news during the post-Civil Rights era and how conservatism played a role. The two sections combined will form a clear answer to the sub-question and be elaborated on in a concluding section 2.3.

2.1. Rural America and available news outlets

The United States Census Bureau has stated a clear definition for what could pass as rural and what could not. It states that towns with less than 2,500 inhabitants cannot be classified as urban and are therefore classified as rural areas (“Rural America”). Sanders and Lewis define the idea of rural areas more detailed by adding two other criteria apart from the number of inhabitants. An area cannot be classified as rural if it belongs to a metropolitan area such as a city or a suburb, and the area needs to have a “rural character,” which entails having agricultural areas in the district (Sanders and Lewis 35). Rural areas in the United States during the post-Civil Rights era were characterized by poverty and deprivation. As mentioned in chapter I, due to rural Americans generally being less educated than Americans living in urban areas, they tend to be more conservative, valuing familial tradition, hierarchy, and property. Even though several federal welfare programs were available during the post-Civil Rights era, participation in these programs was far lower in rural areas compared to urban

areas, even though poverty in rural areas was more acute (Osgood 41). Osgood argues that this is because of prevailing conservative ideals in rural areas, meaning that federal aid systems were not appreciated and not wanted, no matter how necessary they were (41). This eventually led to President Nixon's Rural Development Act of 1972, which enabled the United States Department of Agriculture to greatly expand. This boosted positivity for rural residents and brought about several political groups that advocated for rural residents' political concerns (Martinez-Brawley 205). Through these rural political groups, politics and policy-making became much more accessible in rural areas of the United States and enabled rural residents to engage in politics actively.

The post-Civil Rights era was marked by a decline in radio and an increase in television usage. Radio broadcasting had found its way to the American household around the 1930s when commercial and non-commercial radio shows were available for everyone owning a radio (Sterling 225). It experienced its "golden age" up until the 1950s, when television was introduced. With radio being the most popular place to obtain news, it was also interesting for politicians to use the outlet to convey political messages to the public, which was mainly used during the Great Depression and World War II. When in the 1960s television skyrocketed in popularity, politicians swapped radio for the new outlet to reach more people (Gunderman). Even though radio became less popular, it did not disappear entirely and was still available to the public. Despite the fact that the rise of television had already started in the 1950s, it became more popular after the broadcast of the first moon landing in 1969 and when the majority of American households acquired color televisions (Bellis). As far as rural areas in the United States were concerned, television contributed to a blending of rural and urban culture. Even the most isolated places could now acquire news and other shows (McReynolds 540). Apart from radio and television, rural communities in the United States also had access to one of the oldest forms of news obtaining, printed newspapers. Newspapers

significantly contributed to the quality of life in the more regional parts of the United States (Abernathy 21). They were able to form a connection among community members and covered great deals of news, from local politics to federal politics to brief updates about the community itself. Moreover, the phenomenon of party newspapers became popular in the United States, newspapers funded by political parties and organizations that conveyed the political message of the particular party. These newspapers had two clear purposes that were combined, namely the conveying of facts made so that it would be attractive for the public to read and believe. (Espírito Santo and Costa 2).

2.2 How Rural Americans got their news during the post-Civil Rights era

From the 1950s onwards, the media environment underwent considerable changes. Even though the social media we are familiar with today had not yet emerged, media started to be more and more digitized, giving rise to a more generalized media (Crowley and Heyer 71). People did not only rely on newspapers and radio broadcastings anymore, as television had become more and more popular and accessible to the public. The commercialization of television, which arose in the 1970s, also contributed to the way Americans obtained news. In the past, there were only three national broadcasting networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, comprising ninety percent of television coverage. These networks could thus also determine what the audiences watched, usually ignored political issues, and focused on shows that would appeal to the average white American household, portraying conservative ideals of family life. Thus, the content was broad and homogeneous, which led to the acceptance of the broadcast information since there was simply nothing else (Lotz, *What Is U.S. TV Now?* 52). The commercialization of television changed this to numerous different kinds of networks arising, changing the broadcasting landscape in terms of the types of programs that were being shown. (Butsch 101). Commercialization and the rise of advertising in between television shows led to more economic means and the rise of more and more television

networks. The more one sponsored, the more influence they had on what would be shown and what would not. This meant that, over time, networks became more and more part of corporations and political organizations that attempted to convey their messages through the network (Lotz, *Television 2*). Thus, television and politics subtly became interdependent, as politics provided information that television, in turn, transformed into messages that could be delivered to audiences. Due to this interdependence, political parties and organizations often had a significant amount of control over the messages they wanted audiences to hear.

Television, therefore, shifted from being the neutral observer towards the “constructor of political reality” (Gurevitch et al. 166). Practically every ideology or political movement was now able to create their own network, provided that they have enough economic means to establish it. Americans, in turn, could now choose what type of program they wanted to watch or which broadcasting network they favored, which could be regarded as a prelude to the theory of mediatization of politics, which states that media become more and more inherent to politics. Commercialization of television has also caused the emergence of a so-called media bias in television, which is still noticeable today, with, for instance, CNN favoring the Democratic party and FOX News favoring the Republican party.

The rise of television brought about a shift in political communication as well, from direct communication between the politician and the public to a more indirect form of communication, through television. The new popularity of television enabled politicians and political organizations to adopt a so-called “catch-all” approach, which meant that more people could be reached in a more precise manner (Seethaler 308). This relates to the theory of mediatization of politics, as political communication became more inherent to television to the point that it was one of the most important media outlets for politicians and political organizations to reach the public and their constituency. As television developed into the most popular medium to obtain political information, it also developed to shape the public’s

perception of politics. The image of public opinion was influenced by television, giving rise to people feeling more welcome at the network where their political opinion was being voiced than another, leading to them being more willing to express their opinions, as they felt that the majority felt the same as them, even though this would not necessarily be the case (309). The rise of different networks conveying different political messages also gave rise to the emergence of conservative networks. Religion played, and still plays, a significant role among conservatives and the Republican party, which is why they go hand in hand. From the 1960s onwards, writing and broadcasting about religion became part of politics (Winston 11). In the 1970s, several societal changes, mainly economic restructuring and the emergence of a redefinition of the traditional American family, led to an emergence of white, conservative Christians in politics, which was also apparent in news coverage. Conservative Christians were concerned about the social and cultural changes the United States was going through, especially regarding family, and feared that, in their eyes, the backbone of the American democracy would collapse (12). This rural conservatism that favored the old familial ideals instead of the more liberal, new ideals, fueled by conservative broadcasting networks, was not only visible in politics but also in religion, morality, and lifestyle. Rural Americans during the post-Civil Rights era were apprehensive. They had an aversion towards urban areas in the United States due to their opposition to extensive government interference, the prevalence of big businesses, and the fact that they, in their view, were overlooked in foreign policy (Knoke and Henry 52). Concerns such as these could quickly be reinforced by conservative news outlets constantly proclaiming these exact concerns, broadening the gap between urban and rural.

The majority of Americans during this period of time was able to acquire a television in their home. However, this proved to be more difficult for rural residents in the United States. Basic communication such as telephone services and television broadcasting did not

exist in these areas, making the residents dependent on other forms of media such as the radio or newspapers (Hudson and Parker 1177). This was highly problematic due to the fact that politicians and political organizations started shifting more and more towards a catch-all approach, which proved not to catch all, as some rural residents were left out. It should be noted, however, that the unavailability of television was only true for the most remote areas of the United States, such as rural Alaska. Most rural areas in the contiguous United States were able to have a telephone or television connection and thus acquire political news from television (1177).

2.3. Concluding remarks

The primary trend that becomes visible from this chapter is that the rise of television has led to a broader landscape regarding news outlets and political communication. Where there were only three national broadcasting networks in the past, dozens of new networks arose during this era, making it possible for Americans to choose what to watch. It has also established the available news outlets for people to acquire news from during the post-Civil Rights era. Even though radio and newspapers were a prevalent means of communicating news, this era is marked by the rise of television in the domestic American household. Due to commercialization, television became more popular and more accessible, giving rise to a shift in political communication, which became to be more and more through television and the catch-all approach rather than direct communication between politicians and constituencies. Americans could now choose from dozens of television networks that each had their own message, which enabled them to (further) develop their political views and express these among other, like-minded people. The prevailing poverty during this era fueled the degree of conservatism, especially in rural areas of the United States, and thus increased the popularity of right-wing and conservative news outlets, as it was now possible for Americans to choose to only watch conservative networks. This way, the conservative message was easily

distributed across all parts of American society. Even though the theory of mediatization of politics is mainly being applied to forms of what we today perceive as new media, it could also be applied to television becoming the most popular form of political communication, as this became further inherent in television. Even though rural areas in Alaska at that time were not able to obtain a telephone or television signal, this is negligible for this thesis, as the majority of rural areas did have access to the newly arisen means of communication that is television.

Chapter III – Social Media Development in the Post-Cold War Era, 1989-2008

The following chapter will discuss the second era, namely the post-Cold War era, comprising the years 1989 until 2008. It aims to answer the second sub-question that asks; how has social media developed in rural areas of the United States during the post-Cold War era? The chapter is, again, divided into two sections. Section 3.1 will discuss how news was obtained during this era and elaborate on the phenomenon of news deserts, and section 3.2 will analyze the rise of social media in this era, as well as the consequences for political communication and rural areas in the United States. The two sections combined will answer the sub-question and will be elaborated on in concluding section 3.3.

3.1. Media situation during the post-Cold War era

Before going into the rise of social media, it is important to establish what the media landscape looked like during the post-Cold War era in the United States. The post-Cold War era is often categorized into the so-called third wave of globalization. Such a wave could be identified as a period of time in which developments in technology lead to an increase in connectedness around the world. The central aspect of the third wave of globalization, starting around 1990, is the rise and development of internet usage, which could connect many people worldwide. This third wave precedes the first and second, starting from approximately 1870 and 1950, respectively (Straw and Glennie 2). As digitization became more and more standard, so did computer usage and other new, digital technologies, making television less necessary and therefore less popular (Fickers 248). The rise in popularity regarding digitized information is part of the so-called digital revolution that took place from the 1980s until the present day. It results from the rapid emergence of new information technologies and the mass production of digital machines such as the computer, the cell phone, and the fax machine (Harvey 399). The digital revolution has had a significant impact on society as a whole, of

which politics and political communication is a significant aspect. In the post-Civil Rights era, political communication experienced a shift towards a broader, less personal manner of communication due to the emergence of television. However, in the post-Cold War era, it changed again to a more personal and direct form of communication due to the rapid spread of the Internet (Seethaler 309). In other words, the post-Cold War era favored more direct communication between people in all aspects of society, including politics, which was made possible by the booming technological developments that occurred during this era. Through email, blogs, and social networks, politicians and political organizations could now directly communicate with their constituency. There has also been an emergence of websites that are purely meant to reach one specific target group, often to convey one particular political message. Some of these websites aim to reach a mass audience; however, many of these websites want to attract smaller parts of the overall audience, which are often more loyal to the political organization. This gives rise to a partisan environment surrounding these websites and often a clear bias towards one particular political party (Baum and Groeling 347). The role social media networks played regarding political communication and how this changed the political landscape compared to the post-Civil Rights era will be further elaborated on in section 3.2. Television did also still play a role. However, the types of programs regarding political communication changed. In the post-Civil Rights era, television programs were mainstream and broad, attempting to reach as many people as possible, whereas, in the post-Cold War era, the concept of “narrowcasting” became popular, which entailed specialized television programs altered to specific groups (Seethaler 309). This has given rise to people of the same community, with the same ethnic background or the same political orientation, to cluster together in certain television networks. Through social media networks, these people could easily connect and share their thoughts and views about several topics that were at play during that time. It was now also possible for like-minded people to

connect and discuss what they had seen on their preferred television networks. This way, television and the internet came together to combine news and entertaining obtaining utilized by many people in many different ways.

As every aspect of life slowly became digitized, so did news obtaining in the United States. The fact that social media is so broad has led to people having a choice in what to look at and what not to look at online. This results in some obtaining more news than average and some obtaining less because they prefer watching something else, leading to them being less interested in news, whether political news or news in general and less knowledgeable about it (Schroeder 33). The danger in having the choice between watching news or something else, such as a game or other form of entertainment show, is that people who prefer entertainment over news will become more and more detached from reality, as they have no idea what is going on anymore. This makes them easy prey for people and organizations attempting to distribute very radical political ideas and even fake news, which will be elaborated on later in this chapter.

Regarding rural areas in the United States, the digital revolution has not all been positive. It gave rise to so-called news deserts, communities in which access to credible and comprehensive news is limited. Local newspapers were often taken over by “new media barons,” large, out-of-state companies focusing only on profit, neglecting investment in rural communities (Nagy 16). The fact that no news organization in the state is responsible for providing clear and accurate information has led to misinformation spreading rapidly through these areas, often taken as true without any hesitation (Owen 14). Fact is, even though national newspapers are still very much alive and are able to reach a far wider audience, rural Americans living in small communities tend to trust their local news outlets more and have greater faith in the local journalists, whom they often know personally, regarding accurate stories being brought to them. If this disappears, the use of social media as the place to obtain

news becomes the next logical step, as national newspapers and news outlets are often not trusted. Especially the Republican party could benefit from this as news deserts often occur in rural, predominantly white areas of the United States, where people already tend to have more conservative views than urban areas (14). In combination with the rise of social media in the post-Cold War era in the United States, news deserts could form a great deal of the reason why social media has influenced the degree of conservatism in these areas.

3.2. Social media development

As already briefly mentioned in chapter I, the concept of social media is defined as being forms of electronic communication through which users can create to share information and ideas (“Social Media”). The emergence of ‘new’ media, often associated with what we now know as social media, is not as new as one might assume. The research on computers and digital media started as early as the 1960s due to the rise of the internet. However, it only became popular during the 1990s, when people started using it to maintain social relationships (Crowley and Heyer 72). At the end of the 1990s, the phenomenon we now know as blogging was developed, which enabled any ordinary person to log in on a computer, write about what they are feeling or thinking, and share this with the world. The first official social media network was Six Degrees and emerged in 1997. The development of Six Degrees has been highly influential to the extreme increase in popularity of social media networks due to the fact that this was the first platform where people could make an account with their email addresses and add friends to their network. The technology behind Six Degrees fueled the emergence of social networking sites known today, such as Facebook in 2004 and Twitter in 2006, and has grown out to an integral part of how people communicate with one another (Jones). This might all seem rosy; however, social media also brought along a “dark side,” as it could lead to incidents of, among others, cyber-bullying, invasion of privacy, addiction to usage, and fake news (Baccarella et al. 431). The factor of fake news forming a potential risk

is a serious implication of social media being so popular and ties in with this thesis. The fact that users can openly share content they may or may not have come up with themselves forms a risk that this content is mistaken as true and rapidly spread through communities (433). As discussed in the preceding section, like-minded people cluster together online, which could lead to a rapid spread of misinformation among these groups of people. As will come to light later on in this chapter, rural Americans often experience instances of the spreading of misinformation within their online clusters, a highly problematic phenomenon.

As it is a serious negative consequence of people being able to share their thoughts and feelings openly, it is important to analyze how this has affected political communication during the post-Cold War era. During the shift from the post-Civil Rights era towards the post-Cold War era, a transition in audience preference occurred, moving away from what was then known as traditional media, such as television and newspapers, to online news outlets (Owen 4). Regarding political communication, social media proved successful during the 2008 federal election of President Barack Obama and the preceding campaigning strategy. The Obama campaign utilized social media to engage with voters personally and directly communicate with them so that the constituency did not have to turn to formal campaigning organizations to obtain information (4). This led to the Obama campaign showing characteristics of a social movement, which very much appealed to the public (Bimber 133). Where President John F. Kennedy at the time stood out during his campaign due to his great performances in television debates, President Barack Obama was able to accomplish the same due to his appearance on social media. This is an example of how social media has positively influenced political communication. It could, however, also be argued that this development has negatively influenced political communication. The changes in political communication that social media has brought about have also been misused, and some even argue that it forms a potential threat against democracy (Yerlikaya 179). This way, the elements of social

movements that emerge in political campaigning through social media disappear and make place for misinformation. Particularly populists and far-right politicians, and therefore also the conservative ideology, capitalize on this, mainly because social media is free of control, which makes it accessible for such figures to manipulate people (180). Social media has given rise to politics being less about argumentation and rational deliberation and has grown out to be more about what individuals like about the politician and what they believe to be true. This has led to a rapid emergence of so-called “echo chambers,” a phenomenon where groups of like-minded people become trapped in their bubble in the sense that they do not come across other, equally important opinions, making them only believe what is said in their bubble (Khosravini 63). This way, it becomes more and more difficult for people within echo chambers to distinguish accurate information from false information, something aforementioned populists and far-right politicians could capitalize on. This trend is interesting to analyze due to the fact that the idea behind social media was to create more freedom and openness, which is diametrically opposed to the aforementioned echo chambers and the usage of social media to distribute fake news.

3.3. Concluding remarks

This chapter has discussed available news during the post-Cold War era and has shown that the development of the internet played a significant role during this period of time. Positive on the one hand because the media landscape became broader and widely accessible to the public, negative on the other hand due to the emergence of news deserts. This reveals a trend of a severe decline in local news outlets, on which many rural communities depend, leading to these communities relying more and more on social media to obtain news, as well as political information. The rise of social media has led to a positive, as well as a negative, influence on political communication. Positive because political campaigns utilizing social media show elements of a social movement which makes political information and communication much

more accessible and unofficial. Negative because the lack of control on social media enables the development of echo chambers, something that conservative politicians such as populists and far-right figures could capitalize on by spreading misinformation about opponents, something individuals within the echo chambers will believe, as they do not hear anything else. It should be noted that rural Americans do not exclusively have access to online media. They could also obtain national news through television and newspapers. However, they do not trust these media outlets as much, as they are used to having local news outlets where they know all the journalists. In combination with the already conservative-leaning viewpoints in rural areas of the United States, fake news and far-right propaganda can flourish freely on social media. This requires a delicate approach regarding social media. It is good to appreciate the positive side, however, the negative side should also be acknowledged.

Chapter IV – Undercurrents

This final chapter will delve deeper into the underlying aspects regarding globalization and social media. Section 4.1 will discuss how the idea behind the third wave of globalization was to open up the world and let people be more directly connected and how this turned out to become a web of algorithms in which people get stuck. Section 4.2, then, will discuss how the development of social media was intended to also open up the world and cause more connectedness and individual freedom, but eventually ended up leading to the spread of misinformation and manipulation. A concluding section 4.3 will then reflect on these two undercurrents and tie them in with the above chapters about the post-Civil Rights era and the post-Cold War era, respectively.

4.1. The third wave of globalization

As mentioned in chapter III, the post-Cold War era is often characterized by the third wave of globalization and by a boost in technological developments, with the rise of the internet being the main one. The two preceding waves, globalization 1.0 and 2.0, characterize the periods of the nineteenth century and post-1945 era, respectively, and are also characterized by a boost in technological developments (Jindal). These developments brought about a collective goal that that was structured in a way that it would widen and accelerate worldwide interconnectedness (Naím 28). Liberal theorists such as Samuel Huntington also believed that this new era in globalization would increase democratization that would cause a more open and interconnected world (Sarmadi and Badri 2). Especially regarding the third wave, this would open up the world in the sense that people worldwide could easily connect. This succeeded, as people from all over the world are now connected through multiple platforms, and within seconds, news from all over the world can be reached. This brought about a

significant number of advantages, for businesses and individuals, as communication was now able to be more direct.

As with all technological developments, however, commercialization starts to play a role at some point. In chapter II, for instance, it became clear that the commercialization of television during the post-Civil Rights movement caused several changes for society, such as the development of the media bias in the United States. The main idea behind commercialization was economic improvement through revenue models and advertising schemes and was initially not related to dangerous downsides. These revenue models became more extreme over time, up to nowadays where people's devices are continuously tracked in order to see what they search for and what they tell others. In the case of the internet, commercialization has contributed to several downsides that might be dangerous. Due to the fact that human beings make the internet, manipulation cannot be prevented. This is done through algorithms, a type of process that tracks a user's behavior and alters the matters they might see online. The more interesting things they see, the more they engage online, and the more money someone will make. The overall goal of using algorithms was not to manipulate internet users but, as aforementioned, was part of a revenue model that could help businesses make more money, as they could alter their advertising to the online behavior of their target group. The problem concerning algorithms is that algorithmic selection influences the reality of internet users (Hunt and McKelvey 308). The use of algorithms has contributed to an increase in social isolation of the public, as they tend to push certain users with similar habits online together, which leads to polarization between these groups and self-centered understandings of the world (313).

The use of algorithms and their effect on internet users during the third wave of globalization is also interesting to consider regarding rural residents of the United States during the post-Cold War era. As mentioned in chapter III, rural Americans have a significant

chance to end up in an echo chamber, for instance due to news deserts. The emergence of news deserts was caused by explosive economic growth during the 1990s and 2000s. This growth fueled the neoliberalist idea that markets should be left to themselves without much government interference. The rise of the internet was a significant advancement for neoliberalists, as this new technology led to commercial development, new wealth, and new communities. The problem was, however, that monopolies arose, which caused a small number of people to benefit from all the newly acquired wealth. The early rise of the internet seemed to support the idea that competition was very much possible and that it would protect personal autonomy. In reality, the online world has become the biggest surveillance system in the world, with people's every move being tracked in order for big companies to make money (Starr). As the monopolies became wealthier and more powerful, smaller, often local news outlets suffered due to the fact that people were more drawn to the major online companies. Apart from news deserts, it is also very likely that these echo chambers are in part established due to the use of algorithms. They calculate and predict what these people are interested in, which creates a bubble where people cannot get out of. Subsequently, people in similar bubbles find each other through the internet and connect because they have a lot in common and create echo chambers. As soon as these are created, only one person spreading misinformation, whether or not by accident, is enough to misinform this particular echo chamber, which will perceive this to be true.

4.2. The development of social media

The idea behind the development of social media is similar to that of the third wave of globalization. They were both structured to open up the world and allow people to converse and connect with others. It was not meant to just broadcast; the idea of mutual conversation and connection was central ("Social Media Overview"). In part, this was accomplished, as there are several forms of social media on which people can connect and converse with each

other, such as blogs and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. The fact that the underlying structures of which both the internet and social media are built are in line with each other is logical, as the two are very much interconnected. It could also be argued that it did not make the world more open and even contributed to the polarization between people. The reason for this partly lies in the echo chambers that were discussed in chapter III, but that is not all. Influential people active on social networks usually have a significant number of connections for whom they are the center of attention. Being at the center of the network leads to these people being in a powerful position, as they are able to influence their network (Centola). This position of power is important to consider regarding the spread of extreme ideas or misinformation, especially when an influential person ends up in an echo chamber. These chambers do not necessarily have to be led by an influential person; they can also exclusively exist of like-minded people with a similar number of connections on social networks. This does not mean that this is any less problematic. When people inside such a chamber start believing only the information shared within their chamber, the polarization of society is still very much apparent. With an influential person present in an echo chamber, the process of polarization could occur faster. As briefly mentioned in chapter I, President Barack Obama recently expressed his concern about polarization due to media isolation. As a result of media isolation and the development of echo chambers, people's identities have become more invested into everyday life. This leads to small issues that might initially not be considered political, become political (Klein).

Rural areas of the United States are prone to developing echo chambers due to news deserts. When local news disappears, rural residents lose a familiar center of information sharing, something they cherish so much that they are not comfortable relying on national news outlets only, which is why they also search their news elsewhere, namely through social media networks. Rural areas in the United States are often more conservative than urban

areas, and the reason behind this is not necessarily related to social media. As mentioned in chapter I, rural residents are often less educated and less open-minded, as they do not come into contact with people living different lives than they are. Furthermore, the rural lifestyle is and has always been characterized by a strong sense of self-reliance and individualism, which goes hand in hand with opposing government regulation and the belief that those who succeed do not have any obligation to those who fail (Gimpel and Karnes 469). These traits are often regarded as conservative and traditional and conform to the ideals of the Republican party. Social media, then, contributes to the fueling of the conservative ideal because platforms are open to everyone and provide a free space where every opinion could flow. Even though one might assume that due to this free space, rural Americans could now be able to come into contact with people having different views, making them more open-minded, the opposite is true because of the aforementioned algorithms in combination with echo chambers. As rural Americans tend to like conservative news outlets and websites better in the first place, they will engage with these more than with liberal or Democratic websites. Due to the existence of echo chambers people are led to believe only the news from the echo chamber they find themselves in. If a particular echo chamber only spreads conservative, Republican news, the people in this chamber will not only take this news as the only truth, they will also reject news from other news outlets, as they spread the news that is not approved by the people in that chamber. The algorithm, then, will start feeding them only Republican and conservative websites so that the users will use the platforms more. The same happens to every member of the community, which could lead to them ending up in an echo chamber with only like-minded people, leading to them becoming so attached to this particular chamber that they fail to comprehend that their chamber is not the only reliable source where they could get their news. It is even possible that people's views become more extreme because of the echo chamber. Like-minded people can deliberate freely with each other, whenever they want.

Without hearing contrary views, they will influence each other in more extreme views, which will lead to a downward cycle towards political extremism (O'Hara and Stevens 405).

4.3. Concluding remarks

This final chapter has analyzed the underlying factors regarding the development of conservatism in rural areas of the United States and has discussed globalization and the development of social media. Both phenomena discussed were not initially meant to cause manipulation and problems; the third wave of globalization caused the world to open up and made it relatively smaller. As the development of social media relied on the third wave of globalization in terms of its development, its structure was similar, with the addition that it intended to provide a free communication network where people from all over the world could connect and share opinions and views. Even though the two factors were not intentionally meant to cause problems, both brought along several downsides. The third wave of globalization caused the development and rise of algorithms that were initially meant to keep people online, which would be convenient for the revenues. However, it also kept people in their bubbles as they would only click on what would be served to them. The development of social media created echo chambers in which people, such as rural Americans, could easily get stuck. Due to the platform's openness, some people could develop an influential network that can influence and affect political views. A combination of the algorithms, echo chambers, and influential people ending up in those chambers causes networks to polarize and therefore to close instead of open. It is important to note, however, that the technology behind the internet and, therefore, also behind the development of social media is relatively young. The polarization and closing of the world that both factors have brought about could also turn out to be a temporary hiccup in the overall process of technological development. Only time will tell whether these problems will stay or whether people will be able to overcome them.

Conclusion

When comparing the post-Civil Rights era to the post-Cold War era, it could be argued that the development of social media did have an influence on the degree of conservatism, in the sense that it had a direct influence on the development of news deserts and echo chambers. These two phenomena are very much significant for this thesis due to the fact that the rise of social media caused these two phenomena to be able to develop, and both have caused implications regarding the degree of rural conservatism in the United States. The existence of news deserts and echo chambers in the post-Cold War era, phenomena that did not yet exist in the post-Civil Rights era, did not necessarily drastically change the degree of rural conservatism, but it did make the manner in which rural Americans obtained news very different. The rapid emergence of news deserts has caused rural residents of the United States to be pushed into echo chambers in which they get stuck. As these echo chambers are the perfect breeding ground for an environment in which people's views become more and more extreme, a downward cycle is difficult to prevent. The immediate danger that this causes is the fact that people in echo chambers spread the views and opinions they acquire in such a chamber through their community, which could lead to them also becoming sucked in. The rise of television in the post-Civil Rights era made political communication less personal than before, and the rise of social media was able to change this to a more direct and personal way again, which, in itself, is beneficial regarding the accessibility of news and political news. The dangers that the rise of social media has brought about should be critically taken into account and assessed in order to solve this problem and prevent it in the future. As mentioned in chapter IV, these implications could just be a slight hiccup regarding the overall development of the internet and social media in general, as the internet is, after all, still a rather new development. However, the commercialization of the internet in combination with the revenue models that this have brought about are not likely to disappear. As long as money can be

made, it will most likely not change. Advertising schemes fueled by algorithms make sure people stay in their bubble, as long as possible. This has contributed to and very much influenced the rise of echo chambers, and therefore also the degree of conservatism. The hypothesis that was stated in chapter I was that as the degree of mediatization in politics increased over time, so would the degree of conservatism in rural areas of the United States. In part, this could be argued as being the truth, because political communication becoming more and more inherent in the social media landscape has influenced the way people, whether they are stuck in an echo chamber or not, obtain their news online. An important note that should be added to this hypothesis, however, is the fact that commercialization and advertising schemes have also played a big role in this. It was initially not the intention to create such echo chambers and polarize society, the initial aim of these algorithms and advertising schemes was to make as much money as possible. President Barack Obama's concerns about the polarization of the United States due to the isolation of social media show that this is not only an issue in the rural community, it affects society as a whole.

By concluding this thesis, I have aimed to fill a gap in the existing literature, namely that the link between rural conservatism and the rise of social media in the discussed time frames has not been made before. However, by filling this gap in the literature, I do not conclude everything there is to say on this topic. It should be noted, for instance, that the rise of the internet and social media is not the only way the degree of conservatism in rural areas of the United States could have been influenced between the post-Civil Rights era and the post-Cold War era. Nevertheless, regardless of this continuous development, the extent to which the rise of social media has influenced conservatism in rural United States should not be underestimated and should be critically taken into account when assessing rural conservatism.

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