

Opinion **Social affairs**

## Playing up the US urban-rural divide misses the real problem

The gulf between those with wealth and education and those without is more significant than geography

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Being educated and well-off are the primary predictors of whether you eat fresh fruit and vegetables, buy organic food or drink craft beer regardless of where you live © Erik McGregor/LightRocket/Getty

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As president-elect, Joe Biden will soon assume leadership of a polarised US. But the standard post-election explanation for the national divide misses the mark. It is not an unbridgeable gap in rural and urban cultures that separates Americans, but a gulf between those who have wealth and education and those who do not, irrespective of geography. In order to unite the country, a new administration must better understand this division and respond with targeted policies.

Analysis of [data from the US census](#) shows that poverty and under-education are significant problems all over the country. The share of rural and urban residents with less than a high school diploma is almost identical (12.2 per cent vs 12.7 per cent, respectively). Those making less than \$25,000 a year are also fairly equally distributed (22 per cent of rural households and 18 per cent of those in cities).

Other levels of income and education tell a similar story. The shares of rural and urban households earning \$50,000-\$150,000 are almost the same (44 per cent versus 45 per cent). Twenty-seven per cent of rural Americans have a BA or higher compared with 37 per cent of city dwellers, but with doctorates and professional degrees, the difference is less than 2 per cent.

Education and wealth reinforce inequality. The wealthy invest in knowledge, information and access to rarefied social skills, known collectively as “cultural capital”. The relationship between education and wealth is perniciously circular: those who can afford elite education often secure higher-paying jobs, reproducing privilege for generations.

Unfortunately, US policymakers have largely failed to interrupt that cycle. School choice policies from kindergarten through secondary school, often marketed as solutions to residential segregation by race and income, have [exacerbated exclusion](#). The cost of a college degree has [continually risen](#), along with the [share of high-paying jobs](#) that require a degree. Post-secondary education must become more accessible and affordable.

Mr Biden’s proposals to reduce student loan repayments based on income and make two years of community college [debt-free](#) are a start. But other interventions are also necessary. [Research shows](#) that parental home ownership is a key predictor of the next generation’s upward mobility. The new administration should expand affordable housing programmes, just as the Public Works Administration did in response to the Depression. It should prioritise housing developments near public transport, employment centres and schools. Libraries, the bastions of free cultural capital, must be built in the communities that need them most. Museums, many of which charge significant entry fees, should be free and equally accessible to all.

Cultural capital manifests in the day-to-day, too — in what we read, how we exercise and the food we eat. Organic products have become a signifier of the stereotypical urban elite, living in a bubble and oblivious to the experiences of those outside Los Angeles, New York or San Francisco. But [Nielsen consumer data](#) indicate that being educated and well-off are the primary predictors of whether you eat fresh fruit and vegetables, buy organic food or drink craft beer regardless of geography or race.

Analysis of the Nielsen data also suggests that possessing at least a bachelors degree has about twice as great an impact on organic milk consumption as living in an urban area — and about five times the impact on how much fresh fruit you eat. Similarly, making over \$100,000 a year compared with under \$25,000 has more than twice as large an impact on organic egg consumption and 11 times the impact on fresh vegetable consumption as living in a city.

Organic eggs may seem a frivolous purchase, but they are the tip of a cultural iceberg. We know health, education and income are intertwined, so eating more expensive food signals not only wealth, but also greater access to more significant forms of capital, such as a college education, a high-paying job and decent housing. Just as the US government has [historically subsidised corn and beef](#), a new agricultural policy ought to focus on redistributing access to nutritious food, offering financial incentives to farmers and grocers to offer affordable fruit and vegetables in lower-income areas.

Since 2016, Republicans have increasingly relied upon working-class votes — those which Democrats have held dear since the early 20th century. Mr Biden and a Republican senate must find common ground in rectifying structural inequities and uplifting all Americans, regardless of where they live. Their political survival may depend on it.

*Andy Eisenlohr, a doctoral student at USC, co-wrote this article*

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