

ALTUM INSIGHT PRESENTS

# Rural Nebraskans: The Red Wall Cracks

DECEMBER 2025



# Who we are / what we did

Altum Insight brings together AI-informed qualitative research and neuroscience-based narrative analysis to uncover and understand the stories that shape voter behavior.

We conducted a **digital ethnography** of Nebraska voters over four days in November 2025. The study consisted of online, moderator-guided individual interviews that include verbal, video, and image collection exercises to convey their beliefs and preferences.

## Panelists

- 28 panelists recruited
- 15 women and 13 men from Nebraska
- All rural-dwelling; 20 either earning a living from farming/ranching or from a farming/ranching family

## Demographics

- Gen X: 10
- Millennial: 10
- Gen Z: 8
- Mix of educational background and income

## Party affiliation

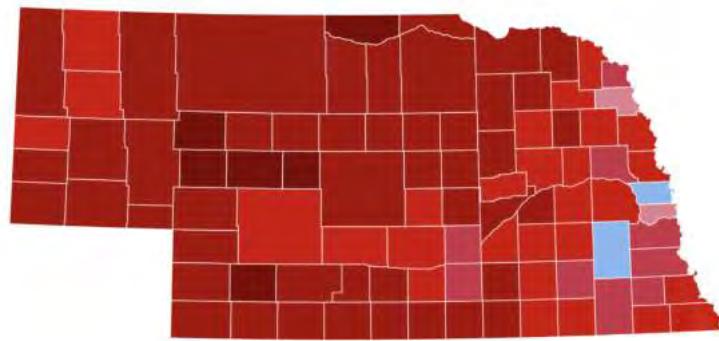
- 11 Republicans
- 6 Democrats
- 11 Independents

## Completion rate

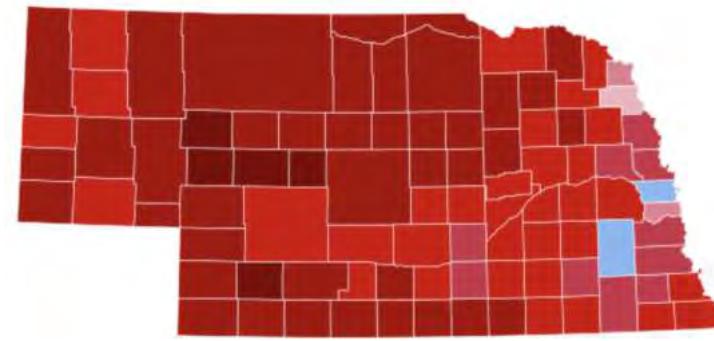
- 28 completed the study, a completion rate of 96%
- Roughly 80 hours of material

# Rural Nebraska has been a red wall...

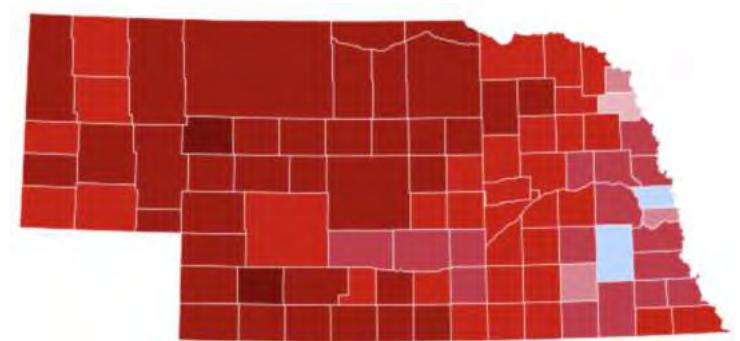
The last time a Democratic Presidential candidate won a significant number of rural counties in Nebraska, he won the state – in 1964.



2024: Trump +21

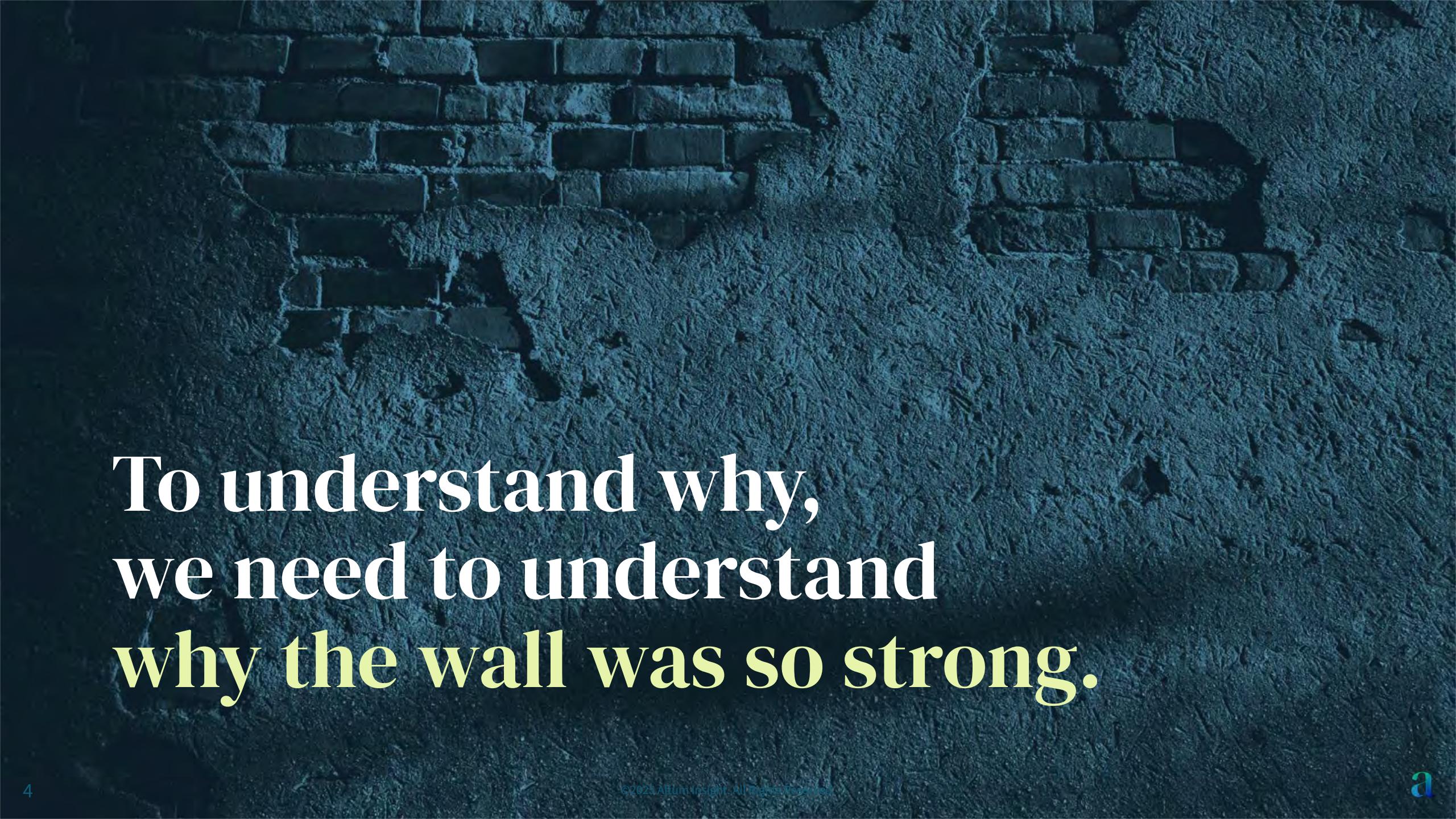


2020: Trump +19



2016: Trump +15

...but that wall may be cracking.



To understand why,  
we need to understand  
why the wall was so strong.

# Active Identities

Critical to self-definition: they guide our behavior on important issues

*Ex: family roles; national identities; etc*

# Inactive Identities

Tend not to guide our important decisions as much

*Ex: alma maters; sports fandoms; some demographic info*

Active identities have clear values associations; affect the way people live their lives; and usually have clear Others (people who do NOT belong to the tribe)

“Rural” is one of the strongest active identities we’ve seen, of any kind – stronger than many ethnic identities.

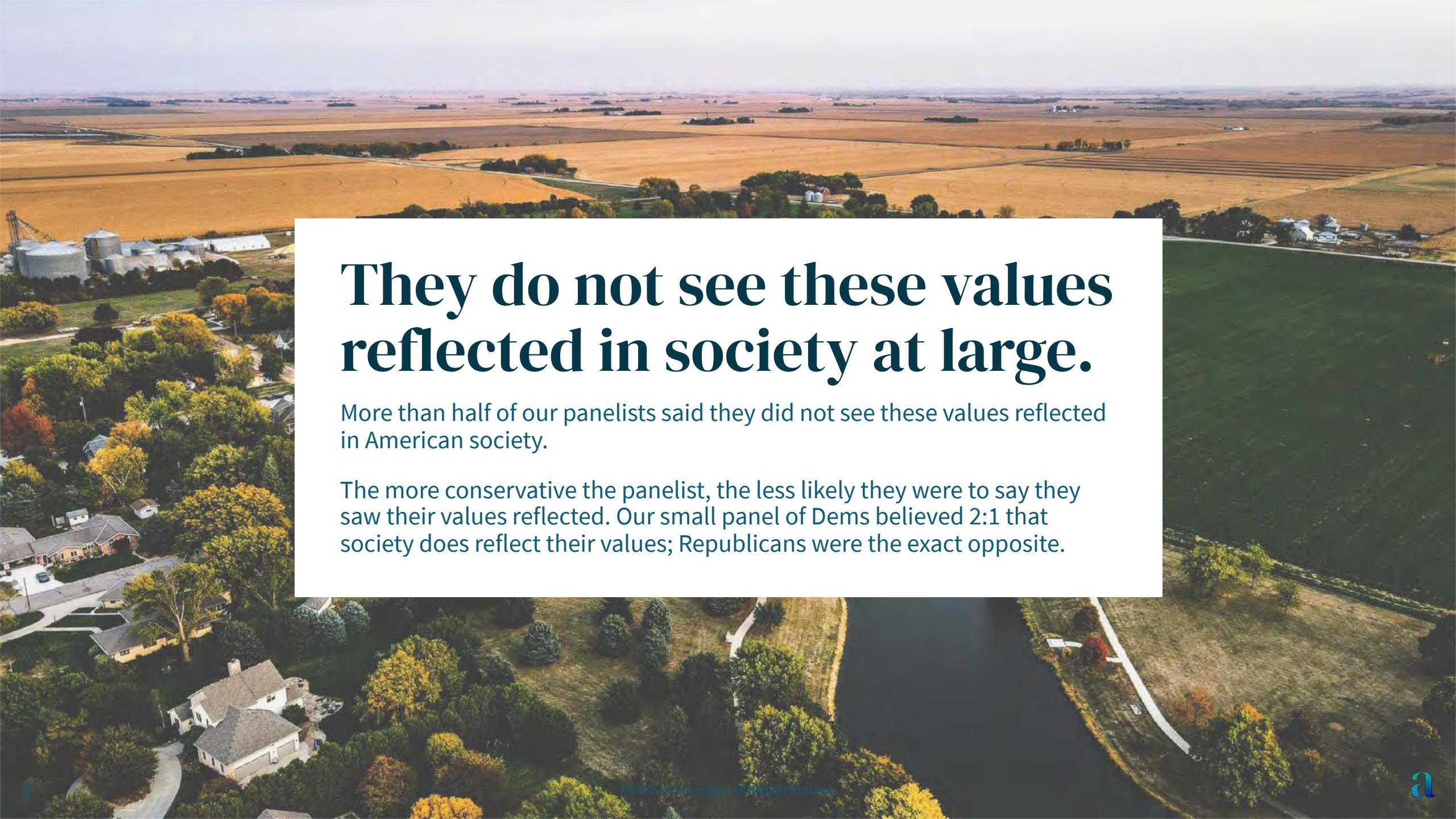
# Traits of rural identity

These are taken from panelists' own values and descriptions of their communities.



One panelist chose this image – the two-finger wave people give each other on the road – as a good example of the rural ethic of respect: acknowledging someone else and being acknowledged in return.

- **“Community” is real and concrete.** Almost everyone described their neighbors as part of their “community” with whom they speak regularly and maintain active relations. **This was the dominant finding of values.**
- **Respect.** Probably a function of community – showing respect, acknowledging other people as people, is a recurrent theme.
- **Kindness.** “People help each other” - recurrent
- **Slow and peaceful way of life.** Recurrent theme. In women (especially Millennial women) this often presented as “balance/inner peace” or was paired with those values.
- **Hard work.** Dominant theme of rural life and American identity.
- **Connection to land and feeding America.** Not quite as predominant but still a strong theme.
- **Independence of thought.** This was often twinned with “respect” and appeared more with men; the idea is “everyone makes up their own mind and respects other people’s right to do the same.”

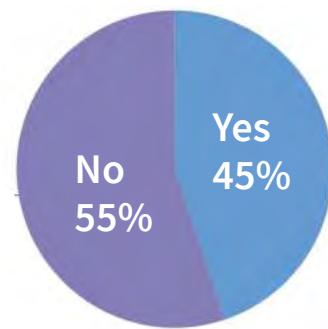
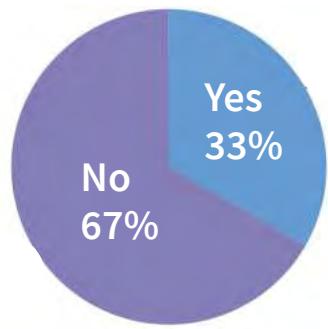
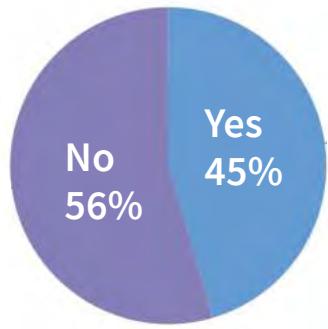
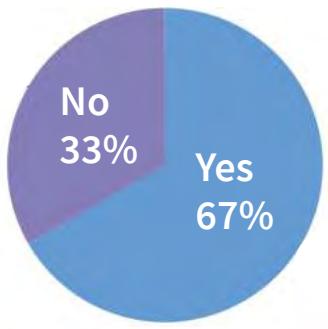


# They do not see these values reflected in society at large.

More than half of our panelists said they did not see these values reflected in American society.

The more conservative the panelist, the less likely they were to say they saw their values reflected. Our small panel of Dems believed 2:1 that society does reflect their values; Republicans were the exact opposite.

# Q: "Do you feel like your values are reflected in society at large?"



	Democrats	Independents	Republicans	All Participants
Ranked #1	• Love of family and friends	• Love of family and friends	• Love of family and friends	
Ranked / Tied #2	• Honesty / Trustworthiness	• Happiness, Joy • Inner Peace, Balance • Respect	• Honesty / Trustworthiness • Responsibility / Accountability • Spirituality / Faith	
Ranked / Tied #3	• Happiness, Joy • Hard work • Inner Peace, Balance • Personal fulfillment • Respect • Spirituality / Faith	• Personal / Family Safety • Personal fulfillment • Personal Growth, Curiosity • Pleasure, Fun, Humor	• Health • Inner Peace, Balance • Nature, Natural Beauty • Resilience, Perseverance • Personal Growth, Curiosity	

# Rural people love being rural.

This was the most content segment we've ever studied. What they love about rural life is all the values above: connection to other people; kindness and respect; a slow and peaceful life; connection to land; independence.

They noted some downsides: inconvenience of distant health care or essential consumer shopping; depopulation; encroachment by urban areas. But on the whole: this community loves being rural.





# Who is the other? Urbanites.

*"I wouldn't listen to them."*



Dominant belief:  
the Democratic Party  
is the urban party.

## On Democrats

A number of our panelists like Democrats on health care, on education, on helping poor and low-income people.

We found some culture-war social conservatism at work too, and a recurrent belief that Democrats are intolerant of other viewpoint, a talking point straight out of Fox News (which this segment watches more than any other we've studied).

## On Republicans

Republicans, meanwhile, were more associated with policies that promote hard work, self-reliance, and national pride.

They didn't have a clean sheet with this panel: panelists from across the political spectrum thought that Republicans were getting too divisive and extreme in their approach to politics, and worried about specific policies like abortion rights and tariffs.



# But step back and we can see how the Red Wall was built.



- 1 Democrats are the party of The Other.
- 2 There's no impetus for Rural voters to switch allegiance because they love being rural, the thing that defines them against Dems.
- 3 Even serious material issues – health care; education; affordability – are secondary concerns in comparison to the strength of rural values.
- 4 The result: the Republicans in our sample had full, intact political identities; anyone who wasn't a Republican was more likely to say they didn't think much about politics at all (with a small number of firebrand Dem exceptions).
- 5 The only way to find a crack in the wall is to find something important to these voters where the GOP is explicitly siding against their values and way of life.

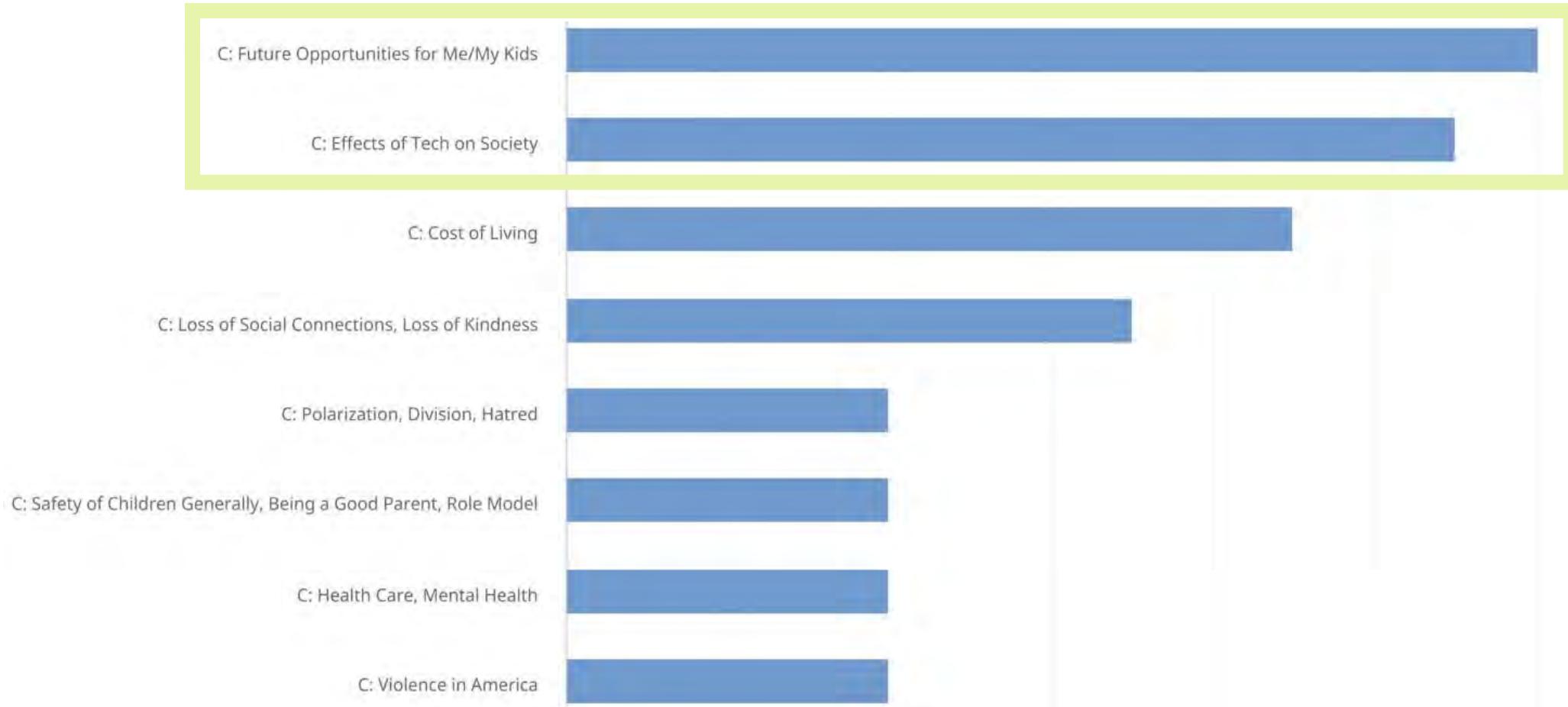


We found one.



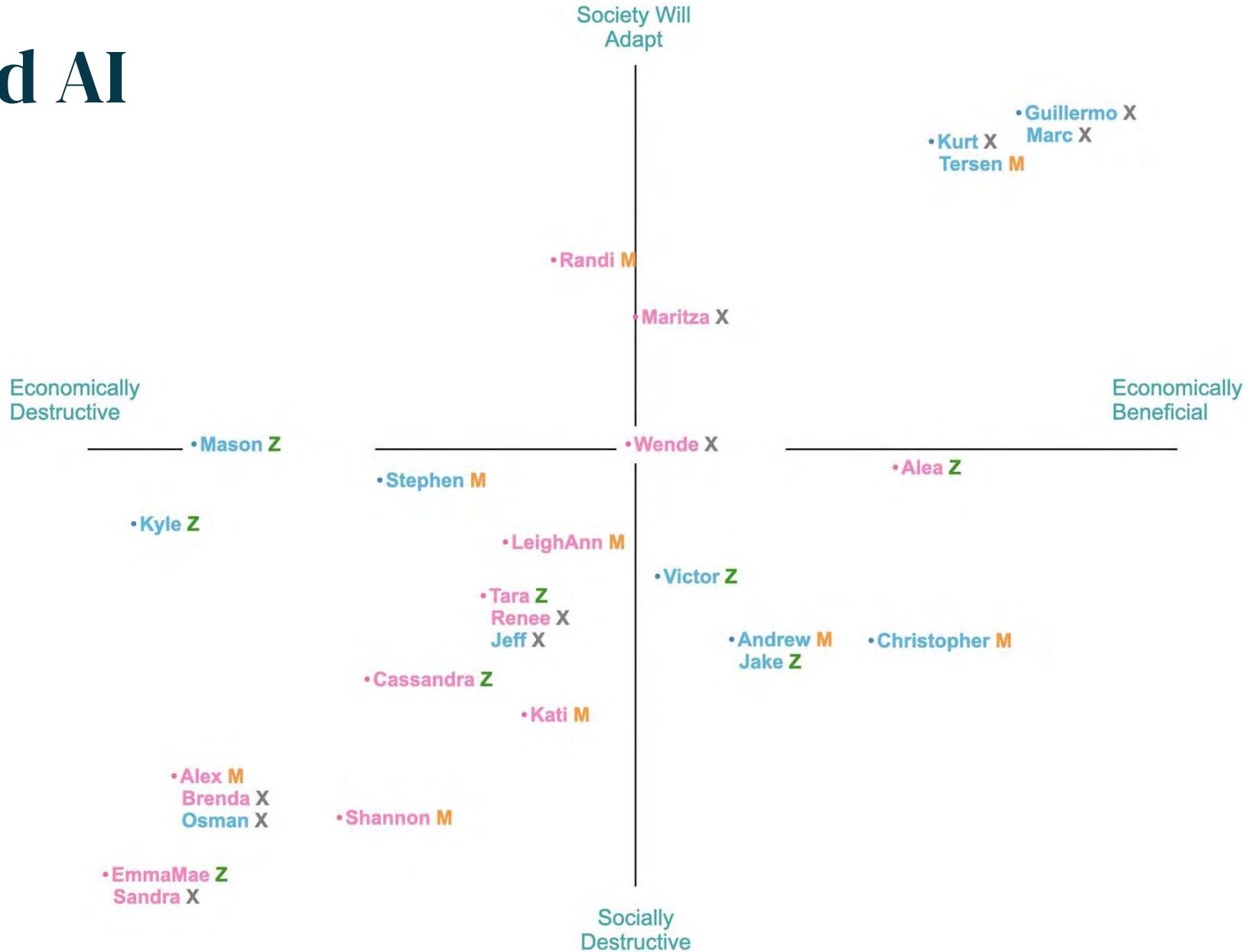
The background of the slide features a dark blue to black gradient with a subtle, flowing pattern of thin, light blue lines that resemble waves or neural network connections. Scattered throughout this pattern are numerous small, glowing blue dots of varying sizes, giving the impression of data points or neurons.

For these panelists,  
the deepest worry was AI.



**The heart of that concern was not economic, it was social and moral.**

# Attitudes Toward AI on Social and Economic Axes



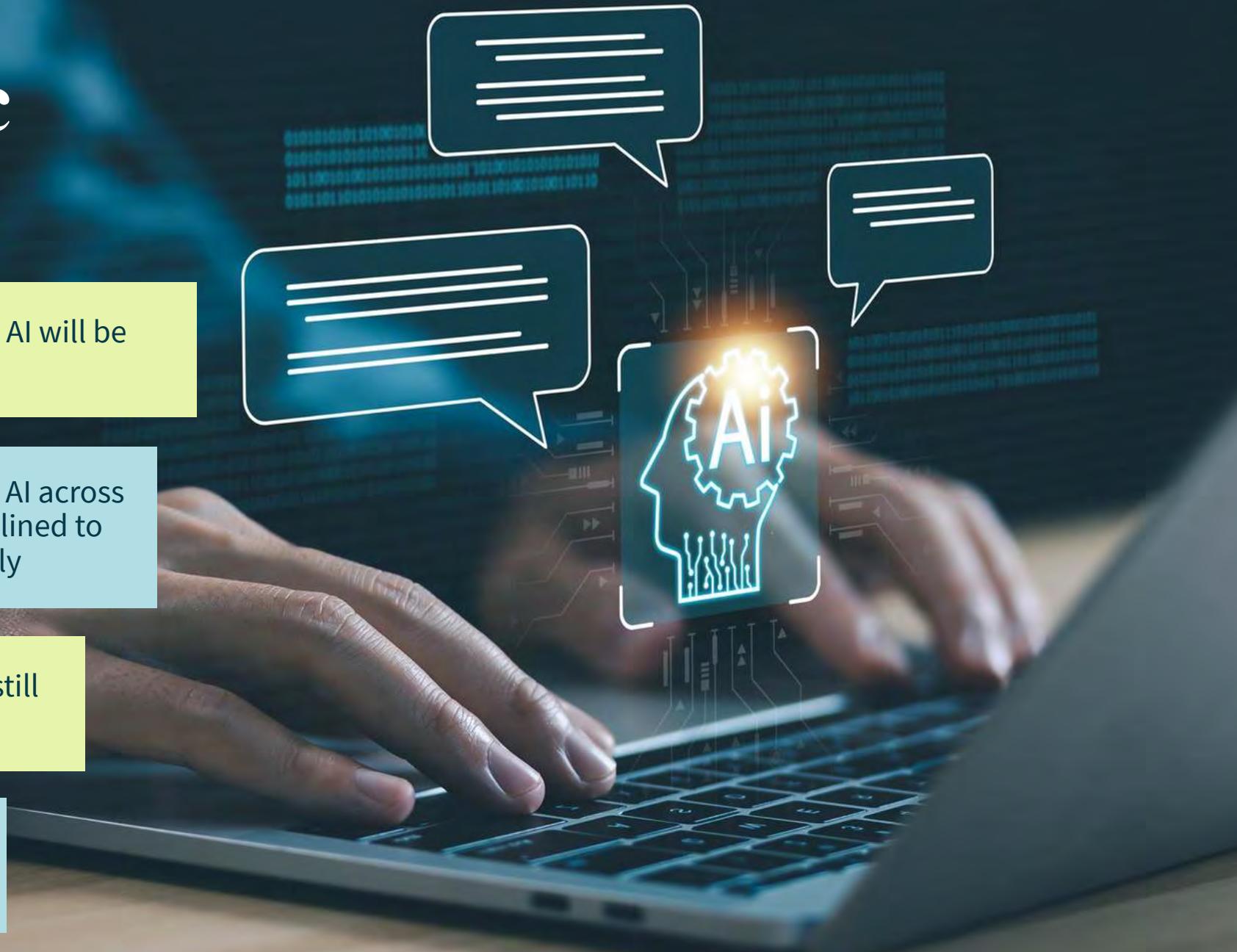
# Demographic differences:

**Zoomers** were most likely to believe AI will be bad economically and socially

**Millennials** were mostly negative on AI across the board but were slightly more inclined to believe it could be good economically

More positives among **GenXers** but still predominantly negative

**Men** might be more likely to be positive about AI than women



# What worries them?

## Effect on children

Exploitation; un-reality; erodes critical-thinking

## Economic destabilization

Elimination of jobs, especially entry-level jobs for young people, and stagnation of wages

## General social ills

Increased division; promotes laziness; reduces independence through loss of skills

## Loss of privacy / surveillance

A photograph of a man standing in the middle of a two-lane road, holding a large octagonal "STOP" sign on a long pole. He is wearing a light-colored short-sleeved shirt, dark pants, and a cap. The road is asphalt with a white dashed center line. The background shows a dry, scrubby landscape under a clear blue sky. In the bottom right corner, there is a small, dark, rectangular object on the ground.

What do  
they want?  
Regulation.



# The roots of AI resistance

- These panelists were not technophobes
- Articulate and knowledgeable about the benefits of tech in farming
- Virtually all of them talked about the advantage of being able to reach friends and family more easily through tech
- But when asked when, if ever, was a better time to live in America, a strong and recurrent theme across political identities was: before social media, which many panelists saw as divisive and isolating

# Rural values

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Community  
Respect  
Kindness  
Slow, peaceful pace of life  
Connection to land  
Hard work

# What is AI?

Speed-oriented  
Inhuman  
Unaccountable  
Distant  
Unreal  
Lazy



# Dog that didn't bark: data centers

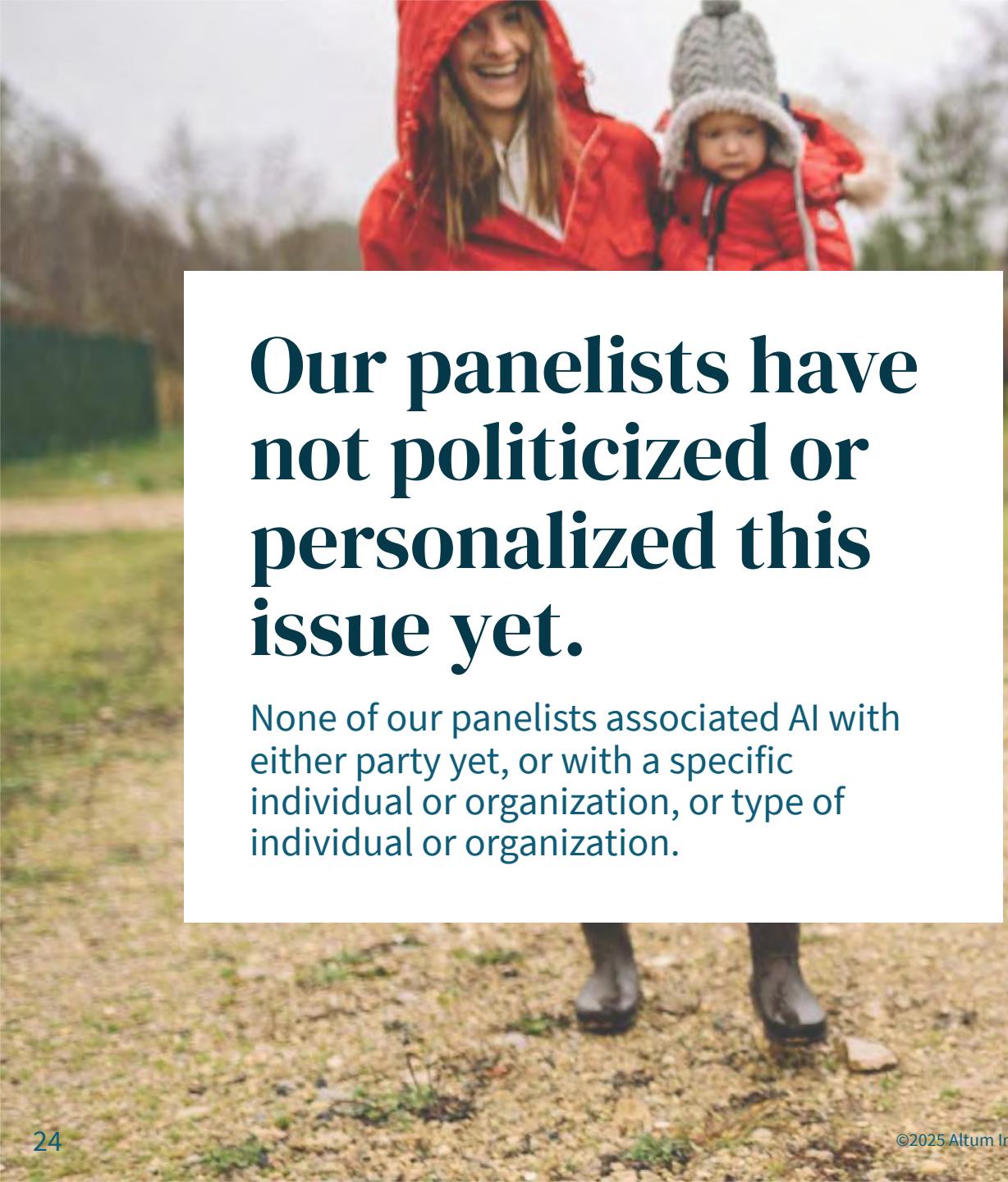
Data centers came up infrequently. This doesn't mean Dems shouldn't talk about them.

But that needs to be in the context of a switch in how Dems talk about AI.

# Rural Voters Might Be Uniquely Open to AI As a Wedge Issue - if Dems don't screw it up

It's tempting to make AI about dollars and cents – the cost of data centers; economic destabilization. Those are good points. But for our panelists, this is a moral issue. Dems need to meet them where they are.





Our panelists have not politicized or personalized this issue yet.

None of our panelists associated AI with either party yet, or with a specific individual or organization, or type of individual or organization.





## How To Do It:

This is about *control*; *protection*; and *fairness*. AI needs to be controlled, so we can protect society - especially children - from its effects, and make sure that it benefits everyone.

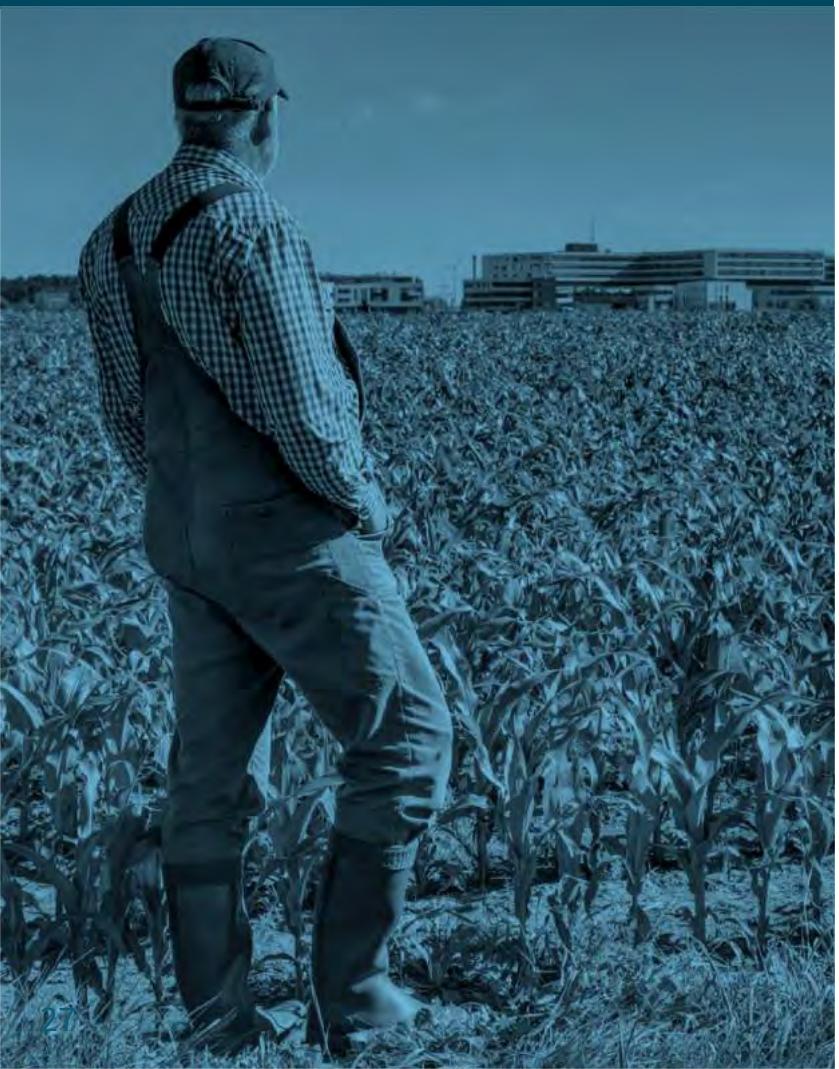
- **Start with protecting children.** We need to control how children are exposed to AI to protect them from danger and ensure that they develop strong critical-thinking skills, independent minds, and connect with their communities person-to-person.
- **Expand to protecting social values.** We need to regulate AI so that it can't be used to polarize and divide us; to ensure that it doesn't replace essential life skills; and that it never replaces the bedrock of American life - hard work.
- **Demonstrate shared commitment to economic fairness.** AI is already at work in the economy, and has the potential to reshape industries. New jobs might be created, but others will be lost. We need a plan to ensure that this new technology works for the benefit of everyone - not just a handful of huge tech companies.

# A crack in the wall

Republicans are publicly and obviously at odds with rural voters on this. Dems have the opportunity to widen this crack in the Red Wall by showing they understand and share the moral case against AI.

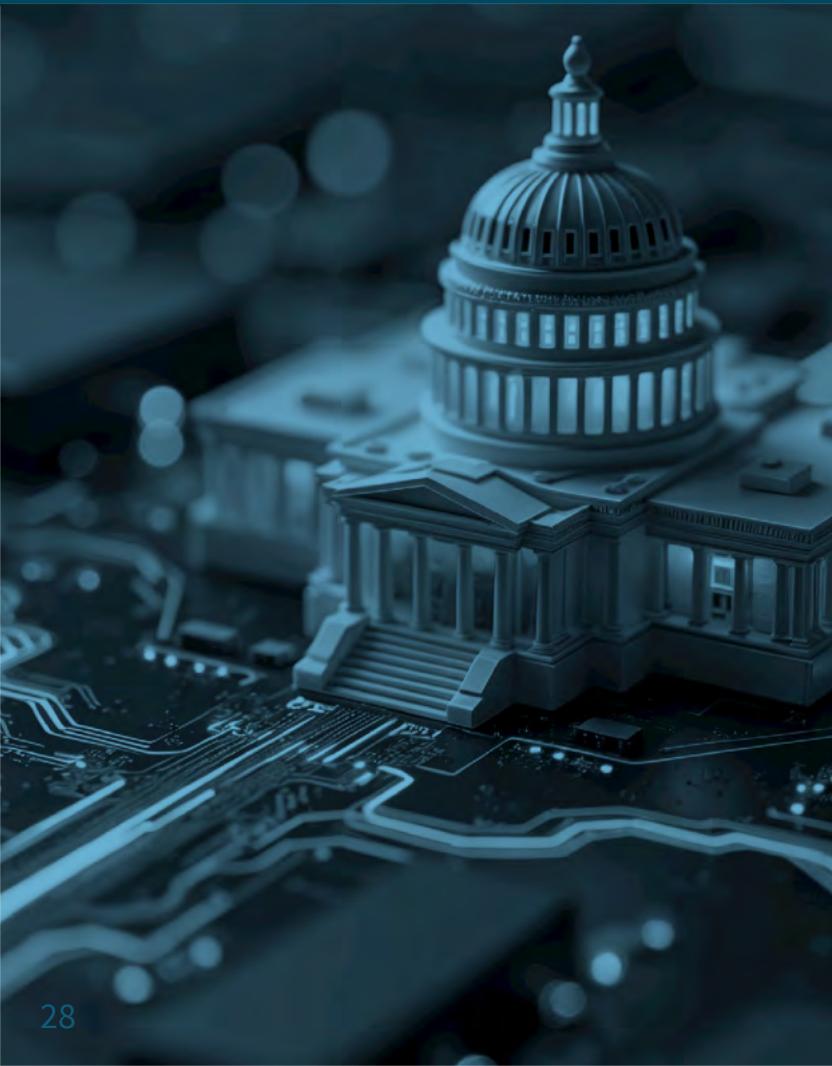


# The narrative



- Once upon a time there was a community of rural people. They worked hard, loved the land, and enjoyed a slow, peaceful way of life. They knew their neighbors as people and treated each other with respect. It wasn't perfect - young people were finding it hard to make a living, and leaving for big cities; things the Rural People wanted and needed, from hospitals to good grocery stores, could be very far away; and most of the power and money in the country is in big cities, with people who simply don't understand Rural People at all. Despite all that, the Rural People wouldn't have changed their way of life for anything.
- But sometime, maybe 15 or 20 years ago or so, things began to change because of new technology. The Rural People weren't afraid of technology; they used it to make their farms more efficient, and connect them to friends and family who were very far away. But this technology was different - social media, in particular, claimed to bring people together but really it just seemed to make them less respectful, more extreme, and less connected than ever. And now, that threat is only getting worse because of AI, which, unless it's controlled, could permanently change society for the worse.
- This particularly threatens the rural way of life - it threatens the human communities of kindness and respect; the commitment to a balanced, peaceful, slower way of life; and the independence of mind and hard work that are the foundation of the rural way of life.

# The narrative



- **We've seen what this looks like.** It's already happening, as technology changes our lives, suddenly. Sometimes it's a mixed blessing - one day a factory opens in a small town, and that's great because there are jobs, but there's nowhere for people to live, so housing gets too expensive - and who knows how long that factory will be there? Other times it's just bad, with **new technology infringing on our privacy, and social media making so many of us, especially children, confused, angry, and withdrawn.**
- No one has a plan to do anything about this. **This technology, AI, needs to be regulated, but the government isn't doing anything about it** - Democrats don't seem to understand the problem, and Republicans, the people who are supposed to understand Rural People, are actually encouraging AI to take over everything.
- Instead of doing something about this, to make sure AI works for people instead of the other way around, **politicians are fighting about the same stuff they always are.** That's just what they do.

# The narrative



- Who knows why they do it? Maybe it's easier than solving problems; maybe there's money or power in being extreme.
- And so **AI is left to run rampant**, doing who knows what damage? It could **undermine people's ability to think critically and independently**; **make people lazy**, and stop them from learning the life skills we all need; further **polarize and divide us**; **cost people jobs that might never be replaced**; and create **generations of children who are disconnected from their communities and unable to tell what's real from what isn't**. It's a **direct threat to the Rural way of life**.
- But **Rural People** and their way of life have survived threats before, and will do it again. We can **demand that the people we hired to represent us do their jobs and come up with a plan to control AI for the good of everyone, so we can protect our children, our society, and our way of life**.

# One more little fissure

Since 2024, we've been tracking a characterological objection to Donald Trump among rural voters. It's been strongest among Dems and Independents, obviously, but even Republicans have shared it:

**They don't like the way he talks about and to people. He's rude, demeaning, and loud.**

This was a minor issue last year, but it emerged more strongly in this panel.

When they described their ideal political leaders, most panelists - especially GenZ and Millennials - imagined someone respectful and even-tempered, who would avoid culture wars and blame-games. Essentially: an anti-Trump.



# So where does that leave us?

- The GOP, traditional home of rural voters, is directly at odds with their values on AI.
- Republicans have no way of talking about AI effectively and their leader is closing potential options every day.
- The GOP's leader may be losing his connection to rural voters, for whom his abrasive, bullying style has gone from being a quirk to a serious problem. If the GOP finds a Trump successor with a different aesthetic, this window closes.
- Dems (and Indies) can use AI inductively as an issue to show respect for the rural way of life and build a connection to these voters – if we switch to a moral argument about AI's role in society.



# What's next:

## Qual at scale to further explore:

- Is this dynamic regional? Will we find the same effect in the South, West, etc.?
- Where are Boomers on this?
- Is this a uniquely rural phenomenon, or do urban/suburban voters feel similarly?
- If so, do they do so for the same reasons?
- **What is the one Control AI narrative to rule them all?**

# Let's go.

Adrianne Marsh [adrianne@altum-insight.com](mailto:adrianne@altum-insight.com)

Kate Monson [kate@altum-insight.com](mailto:kate@altum-insight.com)

Frank A. Spring [frank@altum-insight.com](mailto:frank@altum-insight.com)

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