

## **The Politics of One Oregon: The Causes, Consequences and Prospects of Overcoming the Rural-Urban Divide**

Richard A. Clucas, Portland State University  
Mark Henkels, Western Oregon University  
Brent S. Steel, Oregon State University

### **Abstract**

How did Oregon become politically divided along rural and urban lines? What impact does this divide have on the state's politics? These are the questions that are examined in this paper. We argue that the development of the divide is rooted in several major economic, social, and technological trends that have swept the state over the past few decades. Of these trends, the most important has been the transition of the state into a post-industrial society, which has brought a significant shift in the attitudes and expectations that Oregon residents have toward government. Along with this change, the divide has been reinforced by growing urbanization, shifting demographics, increased globalization, advances in technology, and the rise of a new environmental ethic in the state.

These trends have been important in creating the divide because they have affected rural and urban communities differently, causing the two sides to develop different perspectives on public policy and the role that the government ought to play in society. In particular, the trends have helped to produce a wide ideological and partisan split between the different regions of the state, one that affects a wide range of public policy matters, from abortion to the environment to taxation. In addition to creating this ideological and partisan split, the trends have caused rural and urban communities to confront different economic and social problems. As a result of all of these different factors, the state has frequently found itself in intense conflict across regional lines and unable to find common ground.

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first section, we explore the driving forces that have created the political divide within the state, from the rise of the post-industrial society to the emergence of the new environmental ethic. The second section examines how these forces reshaped Oregon politics in the 1980s and 1990s. We begin this section by arguing that the state experienced a partisan and ideological realignment in the 1980s, one that has caused rural voters to become increasingly conservative and more supportive of the Republican Party. Conversely, urban voters have become more liberal and more supportive of the Democrats. We then discuss how the advent of this realignment has led to increased conflict in the government since the 1990s. In the final section, we examine differences in voting behavior across the regions to show how the ideological differences between rural and urban areas affects a wide range of public policy matters.

Ultimately, we argue that it may be difficult to find common ground between rural and urban areas given the wide economic, social, ideological, and partisan differences that divide them. In the conclusion, however, we discuss some areas in which there may be hope for finding common ground.