

Executive Summary:

The Rural/Urban Balance in Wisconsin

Rural Policy Institute 

New Legislative Maps Increase Rural Representation in Wisconsin Legislature

Since the late 1800s, the United States' population has become increasingly urbanized. While the rural/urban population mix in Wisconsin is slowly shifting, data suggests the decrease in rural Wisconsin's state legislative representation has been exaggerated.

“**The Rural/Urban Balance in Wisconsin**” quantifies the population shifts in the Badger State and examines changes in representation of rural areas in the State Legislature following the adoption of new legislative district maps in 2024. This executive summary introduces three key findings drawn from the report.

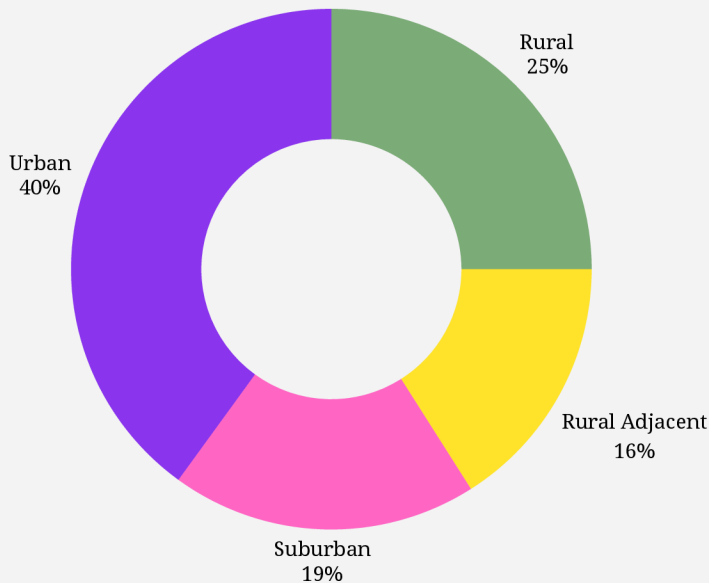
Key Findings

- No single community type (Rural, Rural Adjacent, Suburban, or Urban) contains a majority of Wisconsin residents.
- Rural populations remain substantial despite urban growth.
- Rural representation in the State Legislature has increased under new maps.

**The research conducted to produce this report classifies each municipality as a certain type based on population density.*

Key Finding #1—No single community type contains a majority of Wisconsin residents

Percentage of Population in Rural, Urban, Suburban, & Rural Adjacent Communities



Rural municipalities hold 25% of the state's population. Moderately dense rural municipalities referred to as Rural Adjacent, contain an additional 16%. Suburban municipalities contain 19% of the population, while the remaining 40% lives in urban areas.

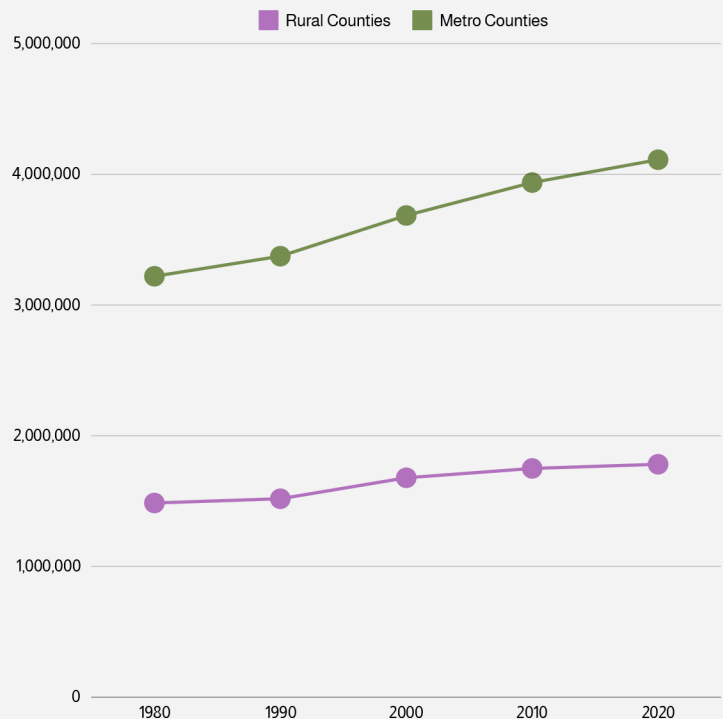
If one were to combine the population of low and moderately dense rural municipalities it would be roughly equal to the urban population (but less than the urban population combined with suburban).

Key Finding #2—Rural Populations Remain Substantial Despite Urban Growth

The population of rural counties grew, but it grew more slowly than metro county population.

In the 40-year period between the 1980 census and the 2020 census, **the percentage of Wisconsin's population that lives in rural counties fell from 32% to 30%.**

The Covid-19 pandemic may have slowed or even reversed the 40-year trend toward increased urbanization. Between 2020 and 2023 the population of rural Wisconsin counties actually grew faster than the metro county population. The data supports anecdotal accounts of people exiting the cities for the country during the pandemic.

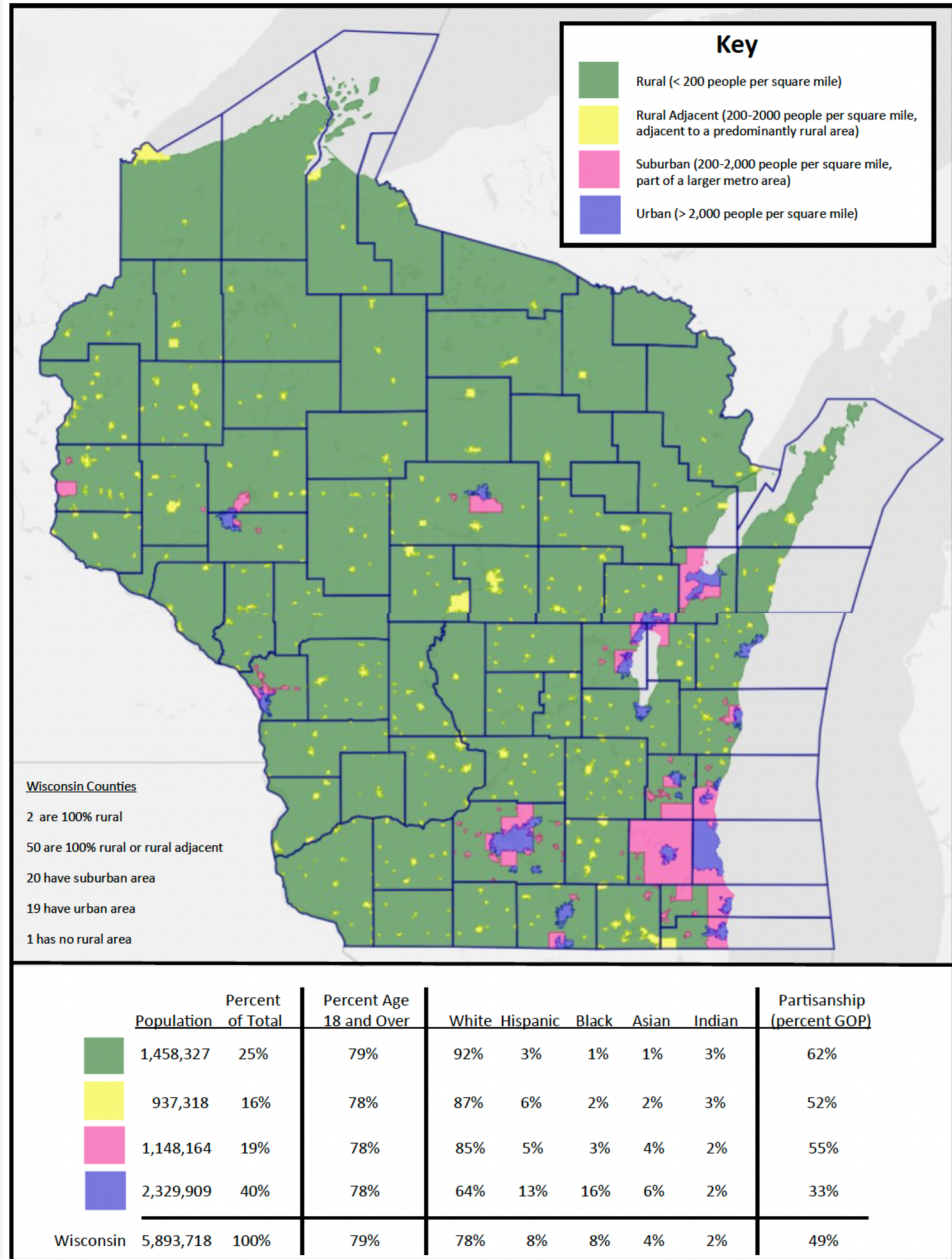


Key Finding #3— Rural Representation in the State Legislature has increased under new maps

The paper establishes four distinct types of municipalities based on population density (see key).

This methodology reveals there is only 1 county in Wisconsin that has no rural areas. Interestingly, the new maps are likely to result in an increase of Democratic lawmakers who represent a sizable rural area in both the Assembly and State Senate.

Statewide Classification Data based on Population Density



As part of the Rural Policy Institute’s research initiatives, the full report detailing Wisconsin’s rural population will be released by the end of 2024. Please visit www.ruralpolicyinstitute.org for questions, updates and further information.