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Descriptive Finding

Mind the gap: Exploring urban–rural differences in US inter-county migration decisions

Anqi Xu

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Mind the gap: Exploring urban–rural differences in US inter-county migration decisions

Anqi Xu[1]

Abstract

BACKGROUND
Labor and housing market conditions, alongside political climate, are recognized as pivotal drivers for domestic migration. However, limited research examines how urban/rural status of areas influences the interplay between these factors and migration decisions.

OBJECTIVE
This paper investigates urban–rural differences in the effects of employment opportunities, housing affordability, and political climate on household migration tendencies across US counties during the 2009–2019 period.

METHODS
This study merges the individual-level Panel Study of Income Dynamics with county-level census and election datasets. Fixed-effect logistic regression models are utilized to explore variation in the migration effects of key factors along the rural–urban continuum, focusing on homeowners and renters.

RESULTS
The findings show a higher propensity for individuals from rural counties to migrate, with rural destinations being associated with a lower likelihood for homeowners to move in. Employment opportunities in suburban areas significantly drive migration. While there are distinct impacts of housing affordability on the migration tendencies of homeowners and renters, variations of this impact along the rural–urban continuum are modest. The influence of political climate is considerably less pronounced. A strong conservative-leaning political climate in rural counties is negatively associated with the likelihood of residents leaving and positively affects the likelihood of moving in. Notably, the results underscore economic factors as the primary determinants in migration decisions.

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CONTRIBUTION

This research highlights the significance of urban–rural discrepancies in understanding the dynamics between locational attributes and migration tendencies. It provides valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners in developing tailored strategies that consider urban/rural contexts.

1. Introduction

Policymakers and business leaders throughout the United States are increasingly concerned with attracting and retaining populations, especially in light of local socioeconomic conditions and their variation across the country. Empirical evidence suggests that employment is a primary motive for domestic migration, with more than 48% of long-distance household relocations being job-related (Frost 2023; Molloy, Smith, and Wozniak 2011). Housing affordability is also a significant factor in migration decisions, a concern accentuated by the nationwide housing supply shortage (Withers, Clark, and Ruiz 2008). Recent research has also highlighted the growing political divide between urban and rural areas as a potential determinant of migration (Gimpel et al. 2020; Jokela 2022), with media outlets frequently attributing relocation outcomes to individuals seeking politically compatible communities (Burnett 2022). However, limited attention has been paid to how migration effects of these factors vary across the rural–urban continuum. Urban, suburban, and rural areas exhibit distinct characteristics in terms of labor markets, housing markets, and political attitudes. Understanding urban–rural differences in the migration responses to these place-based attributes is crucial for informed regional planning.

This study aims to address this gap in the literature by examining the extent to which employment opportunities, housing affordability, and political climate affect household migration decisions across the US rural–urban continuum. It merges the individual-level Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) dataset with county-level census and election datasets, focusing on the period from 2009 to 2019. The PSID provides crucial demographic and life course information about migrants and tracks longitudinal changes over time, improving model accuracy. Fixed-effect regression models are utilized for data analysis. The findings demonstrate that urban, suburban, and rural counties exhibit varying sensitivities to shifts in labor and housing market conditions, as well as to political climates. This study provides valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners, underlining the importance of developing strategies that are tailored to the specific characteristics and needs of different urban and rural areas.

2. Data

The availability of data determines the period and the spatial scale of this study. Counties were chosen as spatial entities for this paper for practical and political reasons: State governments frequently rely on counties for population estimation and forecasting purposes, and the allocation of state funds to counties is often contingent upon their estimated population and migration levels.

The analytic sample consists of 4,880 PSID respondents from the 2009–2019 waves who were classified as household heads. Imposing this selection criterion prevents double counting caused by including other family members, such as spouses and children, in the model. We distinguish between homeowners and renters in our analysis because key attributes, such as housing costs, may present distinct influences on these two groups in relation to their migration decisions (Fafard St-Germain and Tarasuk 2020; Hankinson 2018). We structured the data as a series of person-period migration intervals to make full use of the longitudinal nature of the PSID. The PSID is the longest-running household panel survey in the United States, operating since 1968, and is commonly used to track Americans' residential mobility (Huang et al. 2021; Schouten 2021). The supplemental Geocode Match Files, which link the addresses of respondents to the geographic identifiers of counties in the census, are a valuable part of the PSID. They allow researchers to identify migrants who moved across county boundaries and to track the origin and destination of each movement. Furthermore, PSID data offer a rich array of predictors, covering diverse topics related to individuals and families. This enables researchers to control for demographic and life course factors, ensuring that migration events are not solely attributed to characteristics of the migrants themselves.

The outcome of interest is the change of residence at the county level between PSID waves. Respondents who moved from one county to another are coded as 1, while those who remained in the same county are coded as 0.

The key explanatory variables are measures of employment opportunities, housing affordability, political climate, and the urban/rural status of origin and destination counties. The unemployment rate reflects employment availability and is obtained from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Housing affordability is defined as the proportion of homeowners or renters spending 30% or more of their household income on housing costs, calculated from American Community Survey five-year estimates. The political climate is assessed by examining the fraction of voters who supported a Republican presidential candidate, based on the county-level presidential election returns dataset at the MIT Election Data and Science Lab for the years 2008, 2012, and 2016.

To determine the urban/rural status of origin and destination counties, we utilized aggregated classification schemes from two commonly used sources: (1) the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) Urban-Rural Classification Scheme (CDC 2017) and

(2) the US Department of Agriculture Rural-Urban Continuum Code (RUCC). The aggregated NCHS scheme categorized four county types: large central metropolitan counties, large fringe metropolitan counties, medium/small metropolitan counties, and nonmetro counties. The aggregated RUCC identifies three county types: metro counties, nonmetro counties with urban adjacency, and nonmetro counties without urban adjacency. This approach is designed to address potential variations in the results that may arise from the specific coding or definitions used to classify urban and rural areas.

The analysis also controls for covariates established in previous literature as influential factors affecting migration decisions. They encompass age, marital status, the number of children in the household, employment status, education attainment, and family wealth. Multinomial region variables indicating the broader regions of origin and destination are incorporated because unique regional characteristics may play a pivotal role in shaping migration patterns, considering that most domestic migration occurs within regions rather than between them (Lichter and Johnson 2023; Pandit 1994). Land area measurements are also included to account for diverse spatial dimensions of origin and destination counties. Finally, we include the time fixed effect to account for unobserved variables that evolve over time but are constant across counties.

3. Analytic strategy

This study utilizes fixed-effect logistic regression models to estimate the likelihood of PSID respondents' residence changes at the county level, considering both place-based attributes and individual-level demographic characteristics. The regression takes the following specification:

$$Logit(P_{it}) = Ln\left(\frac{P_{it}}{1-P_{it}}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1 O_{it} + \beta_2 D_{it} + \beta_3 URBAN\_o_{it} + \beta_4 URBAN\_d_{it} + \beta_5(URBAN\_o_{it} \times O_{it}) + \beta_6(URBAN\_d_{it} \times D_{it}) + \beta_7 X_{it} + \pi_t + \mu_{it}, \quad (1)$$

where the outcome variable P_{it} is the probability that the respondent i moves to a different county during the time period t. O_{it} represents origin variables, and D_{it} denotes destination variables. $URBAN\_o_{it}$ and $URBAN\_d_{it}$ are the urban/rural status of the origin and the destination, respectively, as defined by either NCHS or RUCC. The coefficients for interaction terms $URBAN\_o_{it} \times O_{it}$ and $URBAN\_d_{it} \times D_{it}$, β_5, and β_6 are of key interest and indicate the joint effects of origin and destination attributes and urban/rural status. Other demographic controls are represented by X_{it} and its vector of coefficients β_7. β_0 is the intercept term; π_t represent time fixed effects; and μ_{it} denotes the residual term.

The fixed-effect logistic regression approach compares the same respondents over successive PSID waves – that is, before and after the migration took place. Observations without outcome variation (respondents who never moved during the study period) are excluded from the model. This approach allows for the adjustment of potential unobserved heterogeneity in the effect of migration. Conditional maximum likelihood estimation is used to estimate the regression model.

4. Results

Table 1 outlines frequency distributions of inter-county migration along the urban–rural continuum. The data show that migration predominantly occurs within metropolitan counties. A significant portion of this movement is between central and fringe metropolitan counties, as indicated by the high proportion of migrations originating from large central metropolitan counties and ending in large fringe metropolitan counties, accounting for 11%, and the reverse migration from fringe to central metropolitan counties, comprising 10%. The table also highlights movements within similar urban types. For example, approximately 15% of migrations are from medium/small metropolitan counties to the same category. In contrast, migration from more rural to more urbanized areas occurs less frequently. These migration patterns align with broader demographic trends (Golding and Winkler 2020; Johnson 2023), suggesting a preference for suburban and similar urban settings over rural-to-urban transitions.

Table 1: Frequency distributions for inter-county migration of PSID household heads along the urban–rural continuum, 2009–2019

Urban/rural status of origin county	Urban/rural status of destination county				
	Large central metro	Large fringe metro	Medium/small metro	Nonmetro	Total
Large central metro	709 8.85%	908 11.34%	408 5.09%	144 1.80%	2,169 27.09%
Large fringe metro	823 10.28%	739 9.23%	365 4.56%	139 1.74%	2,066 25.80%
Medium/small metro	492 6.14%	355 4.43%	1,177 14.70%	446 5.57%	2,470 30.84%
Nonmetro	152 1.90%	136 1.70%	504 6.29%	511 6.38%	1,303 16.27%
Total	2,176 27.17%	2,138 26.70%	2,454 30.64%	1,240 15.48%	8,008 100.00%

Table 2 presents outcomes from the fixed-effect logistic regression model with NCHS, with Models 1 and 2 focusing on homeowners and renters, respectively. The remarkably high coefficients of 37.69 in Model 1 and 11.03 in Model 2 for nonmetro origins illustrate the significant trend that individuals from rural counties are more

inclined to migrate. Distinct differences between homeowners and renters are also evident. Specifically, renters in large fringe metro counties show a relatively high tendency to migrate, whereas rural destinations show a negative association with homeowner in-migration, as indicated by the pronounced coefficient of –25.72 for nonmetro destinations in Model 1. These results affirm the critical influence of urban/rural status on migration decisions.

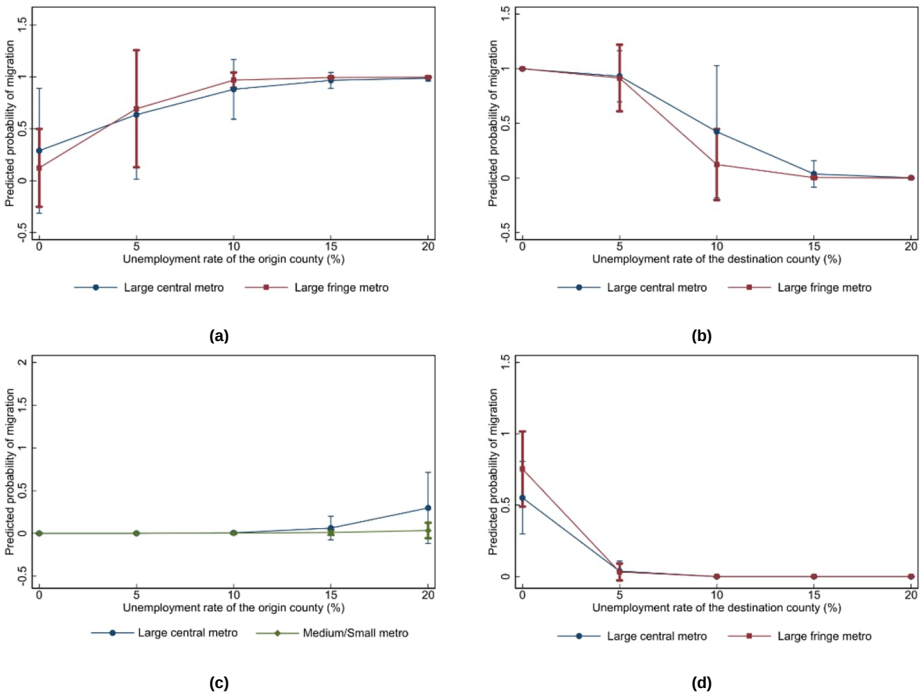
Table 2: Fixed-effect logistic results predicting inter-county mobility with NCHS, 2009–2019

Variables	Model 1 Owners	Model 2 Renters
	Coef.	Coef.
Origin covariates		
Origin unemployment rate	**0.87 [0.58 – 1.16]**	**0.58 [0.45 – 0.71]**
Origin housing cost burden	**0.23 [0.06 – 0.40]**	**–0.06 [–0.11 – 0.01]**
Origin Republican support rate	–0.01 [–0.06 – 0.04]	**0.03 [–0.01 – 0.04]**
Origin urban/rural status (ref. = large central metro)		
Large fringe metro	0.87 [–5.74 – 7.49]	**3.28 [0.61 – 5.96]**
Medium/small metro	0.45 [–5.48 – 6.38]	0.79 [–1.84 – 3.42]
Nonmetro	**37.69 [8.37 – 67.02]**	**11.03 [0.47 – 21.59]**
Destination covariates		
Destination unemployment rate	**–1.73 [–2.02 – –1.45]**	**–1.52 [–1.66 – –1.37]**
Destination housing cost burden	**–0.18 [–0.33 – –0.04]**	**0.12 [0.07 – 0.18]**
Destination Republican support rate	**–0.09 [–0.13 – –0.05]**	**–0.06 [–0.09 – –0.04]**
Destination urban/rural status (ref. = large central metro)		
Large fringe metro	1.10 [–4.66 – 6.87]	–1.06 [–4.00 – 1.89]
Medium/small metro	–1.65 [–6.86 – 3.56]	–0.29 [–2.99 – 2.40]
Nonmetro	**–25.72 [–50.10 – –1.33]**	–9.41 [–24.59 – 5.77]
Origin interactions (ref. = large central metro)		
Large fringe metro * unemployment rate	**0.75 [0.40 – 1.11]**	0.08 [–0.08 – 0.24]
Medium/small metro * unemployment rate	0.15 [–0.15 – 0.44]	**–0.29 [–0.42 – –0.16]**
Nonmetro * unemployment rate	–0.80 [–2.09 – 0.48]	0.08 [–0.94 – 1.10]
Large fringe metro * housing cost burden	0.01 [–0.20 – 0.22]	–0.07 [–0.15 – 0.01]
Medium/small metro * housing cost burden	–0.02 [–0.22 – 0.17]	0.05 [–0.02 – 0.12]
Nonmetro * housing cost burden	–0.58 [–1.34 – 0.18]	–0.05 [–0.37 – 0.27]
Large fringe metro* Republican support rate	**–0.09 [–0.16 – –0.02]**	**–0.03 [–0.06 – 0.01]**
Medium/small metro * Republican support rate	0.01 [–0.05 – 0.07]	–0.01 [–0.03 – 0.02]
Nonmetro * Republican support rate	**–0.35 [–0.56 – –0.14]**	**–0.18 [–0.30 – –0.05]**
Destination interactions (ref. = large central metro)		
Large fringe metro * unemployment rate	**–0.84 [–1.20 – –0.47]**	**–0.46 [–0.65 – –0.28]**
Medium/small metro * unemployment rate	–0.04 [–0.33 – 0.24]	0.04 [–0.10 – 0.18]
Nonmetro * unemployment rate	0.22 [–0.91 – 1.34]	–0.70 [–1.87 – 0.47]
Large fringe metro * housing cost burden	–0.17 [–0.35 – 0.02]	0.02 [–0.06 – 0.11]
Medium/small metro * housing cost burden	–0.14 [–0.32 – 0.04]	**–0.10 [–0.17 – –0.03]**
Nonmetro * housing cost burden	0.33 [–0.22 – 0.88]	0.04 [–0.25 – 0.33]
Large fringe metro * Republican support rate	**0.14 [0.09 – 0.20]**	**0.06 [0.04 – 0.09]**
Medium/small metro * Republican support rate	**0.11 [0.06 – 0.15]**	**0.08 [0.06 – 0.11]**
Nonmetro * Republican support rate	0.30 [–0.10 – 0.70]	**0.26 [0.04 – 0.48]**
Demographic and land area controls	Yes	Yes
Region fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.79	0.70
Number of observations	2,025	3,725

Inter-county migration is strongly influenced by the unemployment rate. Model results show that a one-point difference in the origin unemployment rate increases the odds of moving out by 138% [($e^{(0.87)}$–1 = 1.38] for homeowners and by 79% [($e^{(0.58)}$–

1 = 0.79] for renters. Conversely, a one-point difference in the destination unemployment rate reduces the odds of in-migration by 82% [($e^{(-1.73)}$–1 = –0.82] for homeowners and by 78% [($e^{(-1.52)}$–1 = –0.78] for renters. A more nuanced pattern emerges when considering the joint effect of unemployment and urban/rural status. Figure 1 contracts the bolded interaction terms and the reference group (large central metropolitan counties) as presented in Table 2. The probability of homeowners leaving large fringe metropolitan counties rises more sharply when the unemployment rate exceeds 5% (Figure 1a), while the likelihood of moving in decreases considerably (Figure 1b). For renters, the variation in migration propensity becomes more pronounced when the origin unemployment rate reaches 15% (Figure 1c) or when it dips below 5% at the destination (Figure 1d).

Figure 1: Predicted probability of inter-county migration by unemployment rate and urban/rural status, differentiated by homeowners (a and b) and renters (c and d)



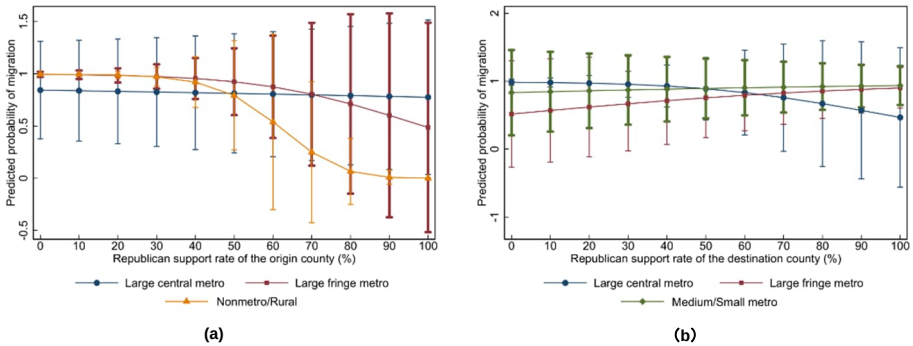
Counties boasting more affordable housing are associated with a decreased likelihood of out-migration and an increased likelihood of in-migration among

homeowners. Specifically, a one-point difference in the percentage of homeowners burdened by housing costs at the origin results in a 26% [$(e^{(0.23)}–1 = 0.26$] increase in the probability of moving out, while a one-point difference in the percentage of homeowners facing housing cost burdens at the destination corresponds to a 16% [$(e^{(–0.18)}–1 = –0.16$] decrease in the probability of in-migration (Model 1). The narrative diverges for renters, as the coefficients suggest a negative association between renters' mobility and origin housing costs, alongside a positive association between renters' mobility and destination housing costs (Model 2). This difference between owners and renters can be attributed to factors such as housing market liquidity, varied priorities, and distinct reactions to economic cycles. Lower housing costs often result in a more fluid housing market, aiding homeowners in selling and relocating; high housing costs stiffen the market, making it more challenging to sell and move, hence decreasing in-migration (Stawarz, Sander, and Sulak 2021). Renters, on the other hand, tend to value short-term benefits of higher-cost areas, such as convenience and social opportunities (Ho et al. 2019). Homeowners are also more sensitive to housing market downturns and may move to avoid potential investment losses, a concern that is less prevalent among renters (Modestino and Dennett 2013; Molloy, Smith, and Wozniak 2011).

In relation to the rural–urban spectrum, the sensitivity of individuals to housing costs shows only a slight variation. For example, in Model 2, a one-point difference in the percentage of cost-burdened renter households in medium/small metropolitan destinations correlates with a modest 2% [$(e^{(0.12–0.10)}–1 = 0.02$] rise in the predicted odds of renters relocating to these areas.

The political climate has a limited impact on motivating migration, as evidenced by the Republican support rate shrinking toward zero in Model 1 and 2. This outcome suggest a less substantial role of political climate in explaining migration compared to job and housing factors. Figure 2 further demonstrates the urban–rural disparity regarding the influence of a conservative-leaning political climate on homeowners' decisions to move, contrasting the bolded interaction terms in Table 2 with the reference group. A higher Republican support rate reduces the chance of departing from fringe metropolitan and rural counties (Figure 2a). A negative association exists between the Republican support rate and moving into large metropolitan destinations, but this rate is positively linked with relocating to large fringe metropolitan and medium/small metropolitan destinations (Figure 2b). It is important to note that these combined effects are relatively modest. In Model 1, a one-point difference in the Republican support rate among large fringe metropolitan destinations raises the predicted odds of in-migration by only 5 percent [$(e^{(0.14–0.09)}–1 = 0.05$]. Likewise, in Model 2, the effect of urban–rural discrepancies on renters' sensitivity to the political environment is almost negligible.

Figure 2: Predicted probability of homeowner inter-county migration by Republican support rate and urban/rural status



The RUCC model results, as presented in Table 3, closely replicate those documented in Table 2. RUCC further captures the nuanced relationship between housing costs and migration patterns in rural areas, particularly in relation to urban proximity. As indicated by interaction coefficients in Models 3 and 4, homeowners in rural counties without urban adjacency and renters in urban-adjacent rural counties are less likely to move when housing costs increase.

Table 3: Fixed-effect logistic results predicting inter-county mobility with RUCC, 2009–2019

Variables	Model 3 Owners Coef.	Model 4 Renters Coef.
Origin covariates		
Origin unemployment rate	**0.91 [0.65 – 1.17]**	**0.61 [0.50 – 0.73]**
Origin housing cost burden	**0.20 [0.11 – 0.30]**	**–0.09 [–0.13 – 0.05]**
Origin Republican support rate	–0.02 [–0.05 – 0.01]	0.02 [–0.00 – 0.03]
Origin urban/rural status (ref. = metro counties)		
Nonmetro with urban adjacency	–0.37 [–5.02 – 4.29]	0.20 [–2.41 – 2.81]
Nonmetro without urban adjacency	**7.15 [0.88 – 13.43]**	–0.34 [–4.89 – 4.20]
Destination covariates		
Destination unemployment rate	**–1.71 [–1.97 – –1.45]**	**–1.54 [–1.68 – –1.41]**
Destination housing cost burden	**–0.27 [–0.36 – –0.19]**	**0.12 [0.08 – 0.16]**
Destination Republican support rate	**–0.04 [–0.06 – –0.02]**	**–0.03 [–0.05 – –0.02]**
Destination urban/rural status (ref. = metro counties)		
Nonmetro with urban adjacency	–2.05 [–6.86 – 2.75]	1.27 [–1.49 – 4.02]
Nonmetro without urban adjacency	**–8.52 [–13.45 – –3.59]**	–2.96 [–6.89 – 0.96]
Origin interactions (ref. = metro counties)		
Nonmetro with urban adjacency * unemployment rate	0.04 [–0.21 – 0.29]	–0.24 [–0.37 – –0.12]
Nonmetro without urban adjacency * unemployment rate	–0.27 [–0.62 – 0.08]	**–0.42 [–0.60 – –0.23]**
Nonmetro with urban * housing cost burden	0.03 [–0.12 – 0.18]	**0.07 [0.01 – 0.14]**
Nonmetro without urban adjacency * housing cost burden	**–0.17 [–0.34 – 0.01]**	0.07 [–0.02 – 0.15]
Nonmetro with urban adjacency * Republican support rate	–0.01 [–0.06 – 0.03]	–0.02 [–0.05 – 0.00]
Nonmetro without urban adjacency * Republican support rate	0.01 [–0.08 – 0.11]	0.04 [–0.01 – 0.08]
Destination interactions (ref. = metro counties)		
Nonmetro with urban adjacency * unemployment rate	0.07 [–0.19 – 0.33]	0.11 [–0.03 – 0.25]
Nonmetro without urban adjacency * unemployment rate	**0.47 [0.16 – 0.77]**	**0.32 [0.12 – 0.52]**
Nonmetro with urban adjacency * housing cost burden	–0.08 [–0.24 – 0.08]	**–0.12 [–0.19 – –0.05]**
Nonmetro without urban adjacency * housing cost burden	**0.19 [0.04 – 0.34]**	–0.06 [–0.14 – 0.01]
Nonmetro with urban adjacency * Republican support rate	**0.08 [0.04 – 0.12]**	**0.05 [0.02 – 0.07]**
Nonmetro without urban adjacency * Republican support rate	0.01 [–0.05 – 0.07]	**0.08 [0.03 – 0.13]**
Demographic and land area controls	Yes	Yes
Region fixed effects	Yes	Yes
Year fixed effects	Yes	Yes
R^2	0.75	0.68
Number of observations	2,025	3,725

5. Conclusions and discussion

This study enhances the understanding of US domestic migration determinants by exploring urban–rural discrepancies. A key contribution of this research is the detailed examination of how economic and political attributes influence migration across urban, suburban, and rural counties, with specific attention to the varying behaviors of homeowners and renters. Our findings suggest that individuals from rural counties have a higher propensity to move and suggest a negative association between rural destinations and the likelihood of homeowner migration. Notably, employment opportunities in

suburban counties have a strong influence on homeowners, whereas renters demonstrate varied migration propensity across the urban hierarchy, influenced by different unemployment thresholds. Housing affordability impacts homeowners and renters differently in terms of migration propensity. While the urban–rural divide is evident, it exerts a relatively modest influence on migratory responses to housing affordability. Furthermore, this study indicates that a strong conservative-leaning political environment tends to discourage homeowners from relocating to major cities, yet it appears more attractive for individuals in suburban and smaller urban settings.

The findings further underscore that economic motives are more influential than the political climate in predicting inter-county migration. Despite the popular press frequently citing political motivations, our research indicates that livelihood-related considerations such as career and housing tend to be more decisive. Political preferences alone generally do not drive relocation decisions. While it's not explicitly addressed in this article, this observation holds true for both county- and state-level partisan politics within our data sample.

This study has limitations that should be acknowledged. The dichotomous urban/rural classifications employed in our analysis may not adequately capture the complexities of migration in areas exhibiting urban–rural hybridity. Focusing solely on counties as units of analysis may also overlook important migration dynamics at other functional geographies, such as metropolitan/micropolitan areas (Plane and Jurjevich 2009). Future studies should incorporate more nuanced classifications at various geographic scales to uncover deeper insights into migration behaviors. Moreover, considering the distinction between long- and short-distance mobility is essential, as our data indicate that a significant portion (64%) of migration occurs between adjacent counties. This distinction is crucial for analyzing the diverse factors influencing migration patterns, including housing affordability and social networks for local-scale mobility, in contrast to employment, which more commonly motivates longer-distance migration (Clark and Maas 2015; Hedman 2013; Thomas, Gillespie, and Lomax 2019).

The implications of this work have relevance for policymakers and practitioners in regions experiencing population shifts. By understanding that specific combinations of socioeconomic conditions and urban and rural characteristics influence migration patterns, policymakers can make more informed decisions regarding resource management and addressing inequality. Our work suggests the necessity of adopting a more nuanced approach in regional planning that takes into account the urban/rural context.

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