



When urban and rural areas play politics, country clout wins out

BY JASON HANCOCK

THE STAR'S JEFFERSON CITY CORRESPONDENT

JEFFERSON CITY – Same-sex couples are [getting married in Kansas City and St. Louis](#), and local laws passed years ago [protect them from discrimination there](#).

City leaders think it's past time for those rights to go statewide.

They want tighter rules about where and when someone can tote a gun in the city. They want expanded economic incentives to help lure jobs into the urban core. They want tougher regulations on payday lenders.

Yet when they press their case at the statehouse on these and a host of other issues, they always seem to come up short.

And while the state's urban centers pay more in taxes and fees to keep state government going, the more sparsely populated a corner of Missouri is, the more tax dollars per person head its way.

It's a formula played out in one state after the next. Rural areas hold political clout well beyond their numbers, winning regularly on the issues and in the division of tax dollars.

They triumph primarily by better holding their coalitions together — driven partly by the stubborn myth that they get the short stick from their big-city cousins — and because the drawing of legislative districts works in their favor.

The result leaves people in urban areas regularly outplayed at lawmaking.

“We simply cannot count on the state government to help us,” said Kansas City Mayor [Sly James](#), voicing a frustration felt by urban mayors across the country.

“The cities are economic engines for the state,” he said, “and yet we seem to be stuck with people who don’t understand that.”

That feeling is nothing new.

“It would be disingenuous to say that the doors were always open for us when we went to Jefferson City,” said U.S. Rep. [Emanuel Cleaver](#), who served as mayor of Kansas City from 1991 to 1999, a period when Democrats held big majorities in the Missouri House and Senate.

Fissures among big-city delegations bolster the rural advantage, and deeper partisan divides seal the deal.

It creates a system where being the biggest kid on the block doesn’t mean getting your way.

“There really is a rural bias to much of American politics,” said [Marvin Overby](#), professor of political science at the University of Missouri in Columbia. “It’s been said America is the only country that hates its cities. While that’s an exaggeration, there is an element of truth in the contention.”

The advantage

Pemiscot County is a farming community along the Mississippi River in the Bootheel, in Missouri’s far southeast corner.

In 2012, Democrat Terry Swinger launched a long-shot campaign to represent the area in the Missouri Senate.

“St. Louis and Kansas City get too much already,” he declared in a TV ad. “That’s got to stop.”

It may make for good TV. But it falls apart with a closer look. In just one area of spending, Medicaid, Pemiscot County received nearly \$3,000 in per-capita benefits last year — more than double what Jackson County got. Pemiscot also got almost twice as much per capita as Jackson in food stamp funds.

Jackson County residents paid more than \$900 per person in Missouri corporate and income taxes collected in the most recent fiscal year, compared to roughly \$145 for Worth County next to the Iowa state line — the state's smallest county, with a population of a little more than 2,000.

Yet when those taxes get spent, they flow more readily to people in and near small towns.

Bridge and highway money, doled out by region rather than county, is made up of both state and federal funds. The four-county region that includes Jackson County received about \$1,600 per capita in transportation spending over the last decade.

The 24-county region in southeast Missouri — which has a total population smaller than Jackson County alone — received \$2,319 per person.

Recent studies in [Georgia](#), [Indiana](#) and [Kentucky](#) found a similar dynamic, with rural areas receiving a bigger portion of their states' budget than they paid in state taxes. At the federal level, the [top three states in terms of per-capita federal aid](#) — Alaska, Wyoming and Delaware — are also among the nation's smallest in terms of population.

“Kansas City and St. Louis pay the bills in this state,” said Missouri Rep. [John Rizzo](#), a Kansas City Democrat. “But our voices fall on deaf ears when it comes to making the laws of this state.”

The explanation for the money shift is twofold: Wages in the cities are generally higher, producing more tax revenue. And the costs to deliver services to fewer people who live farther apart also run higher.

Roads in rural America stretch farther and are used less. Schools have fewer students spread out in a wider geographic swath. And sparsely populated towns and counties don't have the tax base to fund essential services by themselves.

"Every study around the country has shown that fact: Urban areas subsidize rural areas," said [Dagney Faulk](#), director of research for the Center for Business and Economic Research at Ball State University.

There are also structural reasons behind the disparity.

Kansas is three years into a [decade-long \\$7.8 billion transportation spending plan](#). While it's more expensive to rebuild a highway in an urban setting, the majority of that money will end up in rural areas, said Jerry Younger, deputy secretary and state transportation engineer for the Kansas Department of Transportation.

"There's just many more miles of roadway in our rural counties," Younger said.

Beyond the budget

Cities' luck doesn't improve much outside of the budget.

A recent study found that from 1880 until 2000, bills introduced in 13 states by big-city legislators and focused exclusively on their districts were consistently 24 percent to 34 percent less likely to pass than those that dealt directly with smaller cities and towns.

"Year after year, while most bills affecting smaller districts pass, most big-city bills fail," said [Gerald Gamm](#), professor of political science at the University of Rochester and an author of the study.

Gamm and his research partner, the University of California-San Diego's [Thad Kousser](#), found the number one factor was the size of a city's delegation. The bigger the delegation, the more likely infighting will doom legislative success.

"If the delegates from a city can't coalesce behind a bill," Gamm said, "why should legislators from other parts of the state vote for the law?"

That makes it easier for rural legislators to exploit splits common among metropolitan legislators.

“You can go four miles in Kansas City and find a completely different perspective,” said Jeff Roe, a veteran Kansas City Republican campaign strategist and pollster. “You can go 400 miles outstate and not find a differing opinion.”

While big cities may have more potential clout than a particular town with a small fraction of their population, collectively, rural towns and counties bind together to outmuscle the big population centers.

Few issues highlight that divide better than guns.

In rural America, guns are remain deeply embedded in the culture. In cities, they’re often associated with violent crime and seen by law enforcement as a threat to public safety.

St. Louis and Kansas City officials lobbied lawmakers endlessly earlier this year hoping to stave off a spate of gun bills, including one that became law that [voided any local ordinance prohibiting the open carry of a firearm.](#)

“We just live in two different worlds when it comes to guns,” said Steve Glorioso, a veteran Democratic political strategist from Kansas City. “Easy access to guns causes so many problems for cities, but there is a total disconnect from that reality among rural legislators.”

Many times, cities are forced to go out on their own when their priorities stand little chance in Jefferson City.

If mass transit is on Kansas City’s agenda, local taxes have to be raised to fund it. The same goes for amenities such as the arts or the zoo. Senate Minority Leader Jolie Justus, a Kansas City Democrat, worries the appetite for raising local taxes in Kansas City may be nearly gone.

“We look to rural areas and say, ‘Hey, you guys enjoy our zoos and museums as much as we do,’” she said. “You should be picking up some of the tab on this.”

Party matters

The rise of Republican power in rural areas and Democratic dominance in the cities has created two Americas, with conflicting lifestyles and ideology.

In 1993, half of rural Americans were represented by a Democrat in the U.S. House. By 2013, 77 percent of rural Americans were represented by House Republicans.

In 2000, Republican mayors governed half of the country's dozen most populous cities. This year, there is only one.

When the Missouri General Assembly reconvenes in January, only nine Democrats will hold seats in the 34-member Senate. They will all be from Jackson County, St. Louis County or St. Louis city.

In many ways, Missouri is a microcosm of the rest of the nation, said [Jeff Smith](#), a former Democratic state senator from St. Louis who teaches public policy at the New School in New York City.

"Kansas City is the blue West Coast. St. Louis is the blue Northeast," he said "The rest of the state is the red, conservative heartland."

Cultural issues have been added to traditional urban-rural fights like road and school funding, and now partisanship has made it harder to bridge the gap.

"Rural lawmakers have completely different lives and completely different experiences than cities," said [Jane Dueker](#), an attorney and longtime Democratic strategist from St. Louis. "Now you don't even have common political parties to help pull us together."

The drawing of state legislative and congressional districts also plays a huge role in how small towns maintain big influence.

In many cases, district maps are drawn to intentionally split urban areas and combine them with swaths of rural countryside, effectively watering down their vote.

That's compounded by a geographical, structural handicap for cities. Democrats typically choose to live in dense, urban areas with very high concentrations of other Democrats, packing themselves into fewer districts.

"In Missouri, unless you draw districts that look funny, you're going to draw a lot of districts that are 80 percent Democrat," Smith said. "In rural areas, their votes are not as concentrated, so you have districts that are 55 percent Republican. Essentially, Republicans are not wasting any votes."

The result is a tilt toward the extremes of both parties, said Cleaver, who hails from an overwhelmingly Democratic congressional district.

"You can't get elected in rural Missouri if you're a tree-hugging liberal," he said. "And Republicans in a city have to be moderates by necessity."

The dynamic has resulted in huge GOP majorities in the legislature, but it hasn't completely shut cities out of the political process. Five of Missouri's eight statewide offices are still held by Democrats, and urban centers still hold considerable sway over the success of ballot measures.

The partisan element helps explain, in part, why Kansas doesn't face the level of city-country rancor as many states.

Wichita, by far Kansas' largest city, remains a safe haven for the GOP. The Kansas Senate president [hails from Wichita](#). The [chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee](#) is from nearby Andover.

[Chapman Rackaway](#), a professor of political science at Fort Hays State University, said that while the divide isn't as pronounced in Kansas, regional conflicts still exist.

Kansas City's suburbs are growing and already make up nearly 39 percent of the Kansas economy, according to a [report compiled by the economic forecasting firm IHS Global Insight](#). Meanwhile, western Kansas continues to bleed population.

Affluent suburbs feel they are sending all their money to prop up shrinking school districts in rural Kansas, Rackaway said. Meanwhile, those in western Kansas fear a loss of their community's heart, the public school.

"There are few things you can do that will rile up a western Kansan more than bringing up school consolidation," he said.

Shrinking small towns

Nearly 60 percent of rural counties across the nation shrank in population last year. It's a trend that's held steady for generations. And according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, [urban households earned \\$15,779 more in yearly income](#) than rural households in 2011.

Many of these small communities fear for their survival.

"So many rural counties are struggling," said Lt. Gov. [Peter Kinder](#), a Cape Girardeau Republican, "and it's hard to keep young people living there with so few opportunities."

On the big issues of the day — like education and jobs — "it shouldn't be the small-town folks against St. Louis and Kansas City," Kinder said. "We're all in this together."

There are no doubt ideological rifts between urban and rural Missourians, said incoming state House speaker [John Diehl](#), a Republican from the St. Louis suburbs. But he doesn't see that as a defining feature of the state's politics.

"There are stereotypes of how different areas feel about different areas of the state," he said. "I don't find that to be the case."

Lawmakers who run Missouri's General Assembly say Kansas City and St. Louis have been treated more than fairly.

The last three times the legislature was called back into special session, its focus was economic development near the state's urban centers — the Ford plant near Kansas City, a trade hub at the St. Louis airport and incentives for Boeing in St. Louis.

A study by the Show-Me Institute found that of \$2.3 billion in tax credits and incentives doled out by the Missouri Department of Economic Development between 1999 and 2011, roughly [two-thirds went to Jackson County, St. Louis County or St. Louis city](#).

“When the cities are strong, there are more opportunities in rural Missouri,” said incoming House majority leader [Todd Richardson](#), a Poplar Bluff Republican. “And when our agricultural economy is strong, it’s a benefit to the urban centers.”

David Swenson, an economist at Iowa State University, said the agriculture sector just isn’t big enough to truly affect the nation’s largest metropolitan areas.

According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting made up [1.7 percent of Missouri’s gross domestic product](#) in 2013 and [4.7 percent in Kansas](#). Agriculture-related manufacturing chipped in 6.6 percent in Missouri and 7.6 percent in Kansas.

“Believing that (agriculture) could have a boat-lifting impact is just a widespread fallacy,” Swenson said.

When he first arrived in Jefferson City, former Republican House speaker Rod Jetton saw St. Louis and Kansas City as “the devil who took all our money and gave rural Missouri the shaft.”

Over time, though, he came to realize success in the cities could mean a lot to his constituents in southeast Missouri.

“I’d tell my rural guys, ‘Look, if St. Louis succeeds, they are going to pay a whole lot of taxes that will help the rest of us.’”

To reach Jason Hancock, call [573-634-3565](tel:573-634-3565) or send email to jhancock@kcstar.com.