

The changing Downeast: Perceptions towards immigrants in rural Maine

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Up until recently, immigration research has primarily focused on metropolitan areas. However, the current influx of immigrants into rural America makes immigration an especially relevant subject when it comes to the field of rural political science. For my 2024 Christenfeld Summer Research Fellowship, I sought to merge these two salient topics within the field of political science: rural identity and immigration. My overarching research goal was to examine the extent to which rapid immigration within a community influences attitudes towards immigrants. To do this, I would compare how immigrants are perceived by people who reside in immigration destinations to how immigrants are perceived by people who live in towns with virtually no immigrants. Maine is a particularly fascinating state to study, as it leans Democrat while at the same time being one of the nation's whitest and most rural states (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021)—traits typically associated with conservatism. Additionally, much of its economy relies on seasonal and agricultural products, which tend to draw immigrant workers. I chose to focus on Washington County in Maine's Downeast region, which is both rural and home to a relatively large number of immigrants (see Harris, 2009; Henly, 2012).

I developed three hypotheses regarding the relation between immigration and attitudes towards immigrants in rural communities: (1) Rapid diversification of rural communities in Maine will lead residents to hold more negative perceptions about immigration on a national level; (2) Diversification of rural communities in Maine will lead to positive intergroup relations within the community, and thus, positive perceptions of immigrants at a local level; (3) Diversification will correspond to a heightened sense of anti-urban sentiment among rural residents.

I began my research with an in-depth dive into the existing literature relating to immigration and rural identity. This phase of my research helped me gain a better understanding about the research gaps in the field and how I might be able to address them. I modeled much of my study after Cramer (2012), a qualitative study assessing *rural consciousness* among local residents. Katherine Cramer Walsh used in-depth personal interviews to gather her data, allowing her to develop close connections with her participants. For my study, I decided to use both surveys and in-depth interviews so that I could collect data from a large and statistically significant sample size, while also ensuring that this data was human-oriented and personal.

To begin collecting data, I submitted a form to Bowdoin's Institutional Research Board (IRB), outlining my project and including details about participant eligibility, recruitment, confidentiality, and more. I also began writing my survey, which I would send to online vendors who specialize in recruiting participants for research studies. For the interview portion of the study, I identified roughly 20 potential participants, ranging from librarians to educators to fishermen, and emailed them to ask if they would be interested in being part of my study. Due to their limited availability, I was only able to conduct one interview. Additionally, time and resource constraints barred me from sending my survey to the online vendors. These difficulties left me unable to collect and analyze sufficient data to complete my study within my research timeline. Despite this, I have gained invaluable knowledge and experience—not only with respect to this specific subject—but also regarding experimental design, honing my research skills, and managing my own project. I intend to keep working on this study in the future. I am very grateful to have received the Christenfeld Summer Research Fellowship.

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