



# IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON THE RURAL WEST

*Material Needs, Economic Recovery, Political Attitudes*





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## Key Findings

People and communities in the rural West have been hit hard by the pandemic and our survey shows that these impacts are wide-ranging, especially among vulnerable groups. In response, rural Westerners express bipartisan support for a range of government interventions to support rural recovery.

1

**Covid Experience:** Nearly 30% of residents in the rural West have had direct experience with Covid-19 either personally or through family, friends, or acquaintances.

2

**President Trump in a Conservative Region:** In 2016, President Trump won 75% of counties in the rural West. Approval for his handling of the pandemic was split, with 43% of respondents approving and 44% disapproving.

3

**Support for More Government Spending:** There was strong bipartisan support for government relief spending on healthcare, housing, infrastructure, small business, and direct payments to individuals. The only exceptions to this broad support for spending were for oil and gas companies and large businesses, for which rural Westerners wanted a cut in spending.

4

**Unemployment:** One in five people who were employed full time last year became unemployed by the time of our survey.

5

**Inequality in Unemployment:** While unemployment spiked for all people in the rural West, it was women and Latino/a residents who saw the largest increases in unemployment.

6

**Unemployment Benefits:** Use of unemployment insurance was very uneven, with Latino/a residents receiving fewer benefits despite high unemployment levels.

7

**Health Insurance:** Among those who were uninsured before the pandemic, 27% gained health insurance coverage by the time of our survey.

8

**Internet Access:** Of households that have children younger than 16 years old, 18% did not have access to high-speed internet in their homes.

9

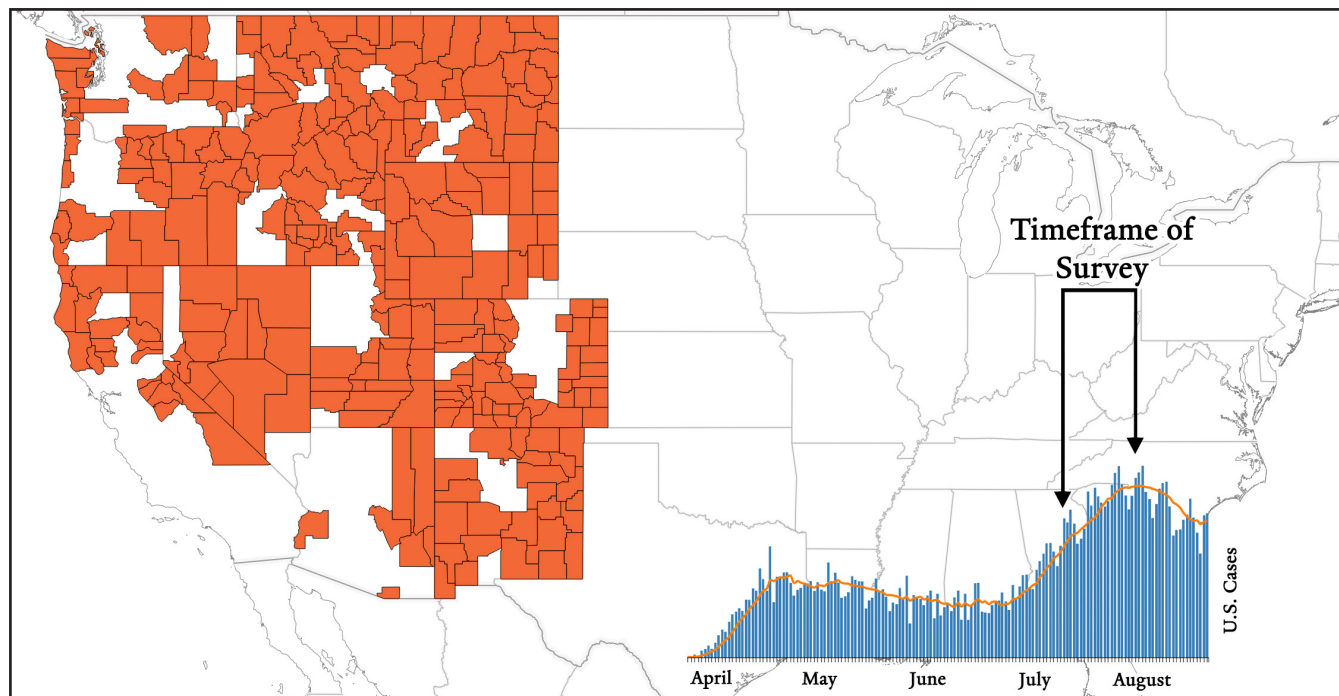
**Outlook for the Future:** Despite high levels of individual and community impact, respondents were positive about the future: over 45% believe that their county's economy will be healthy at this time next year.

## Overview

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted life for millions of people across the United States. Yet, there is a lack of rapid and reliable information about the scope of its impact and potential solutions in underserved areas such as the rural U.S. West. Current information relies on national surveys or focuses on urban regions with greater institutional resources, rather than tailored specifically to the unique needs of rural communities. With this survey we aim to close that gap and inform public policy across various levels of government to meet the needs of rural communities struggling with the social and economic impacts of the pandemic.

The data in this executive summary are based on a representative survey of 1,009 residents of rural counties in the Western United States conducted June 25-July 22, 2020 with a margin of sampling error of  $\pm 3.1$  percent.

Our weighted sample mirrors the makeup of the rural West. About half of the sample is Republican, followed by 25% identifying as Democrat. It is majority white (78%), followed by 6% racially “Other,” 6% mixed race, and 4% Native American. Latino/as make up 15% of the sample. A little more than a third of respondents (34%) have at least a two-year college degree. Like the rural West, the samples skews older, with 20% over 65 and 29% between 50 and 64.



**Figure 1.** Map of rural counties included in the survey in the US West alongside a chart of nationwide Covid cases with the timeframe of the survey. Data source: CDC Covid-10 Data Tracker (<https://www.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/>)

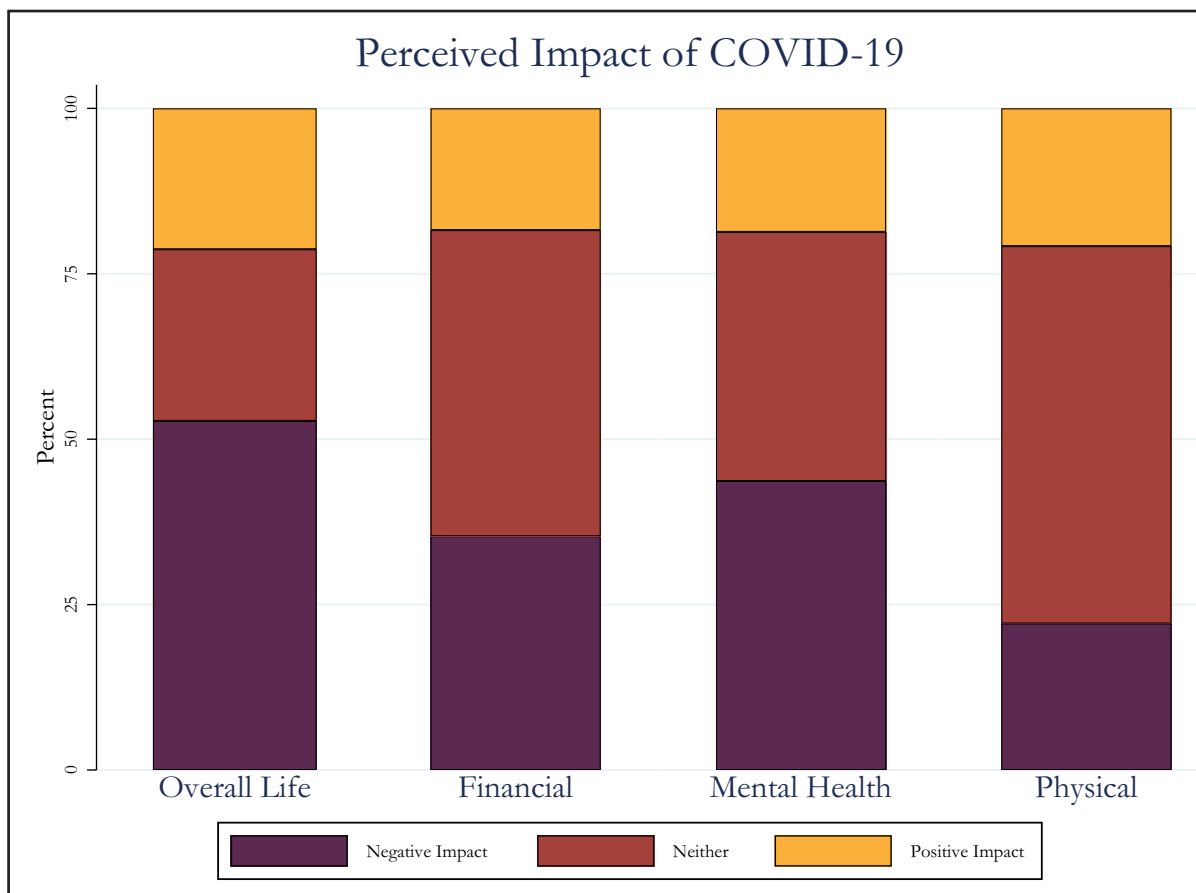
# Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic

## Exposure to the Coronavirus

**Nearly 30% people had direct experience with Covid-19:** Most were confirmed or suspected cases of friends or acquaintances (19%) or family (9%). A total of 2% of respondents reported that they had a confirmed or suspected case. Democrats (37%) were more likely than Republicans (27%) and age 65+ respondents were less likely (20%) than all other age groups to have any direct experience with Covid infection.

**Those over the age of 65 were the least likely to report negative impacts from Covid-19,** with large portions reporting no impact on overall life, financial, mental, or physical health.

**Respondents with higher levels of education frequently reported negative impacts on overall life and mental health from the pandemic.** However, those with higher levels of education were less likely to report negative financial impacts.



**Figure 2.** Over 50% of respondents perceived that Covid-19 negatively impacted their life overall. Mental health was more negatively affected than either financial or physical health.

## ***Impacts to Employment and Use of Assistance***

**A fifth of those who were employed full time in the year prior to the survey were not by the time of the survey.** A total of 53% of respondents reported they had full time employment in the year prior to the pandemic, whereas only 42% of respondents reported they had full-time employment in the month leading up to the survey.

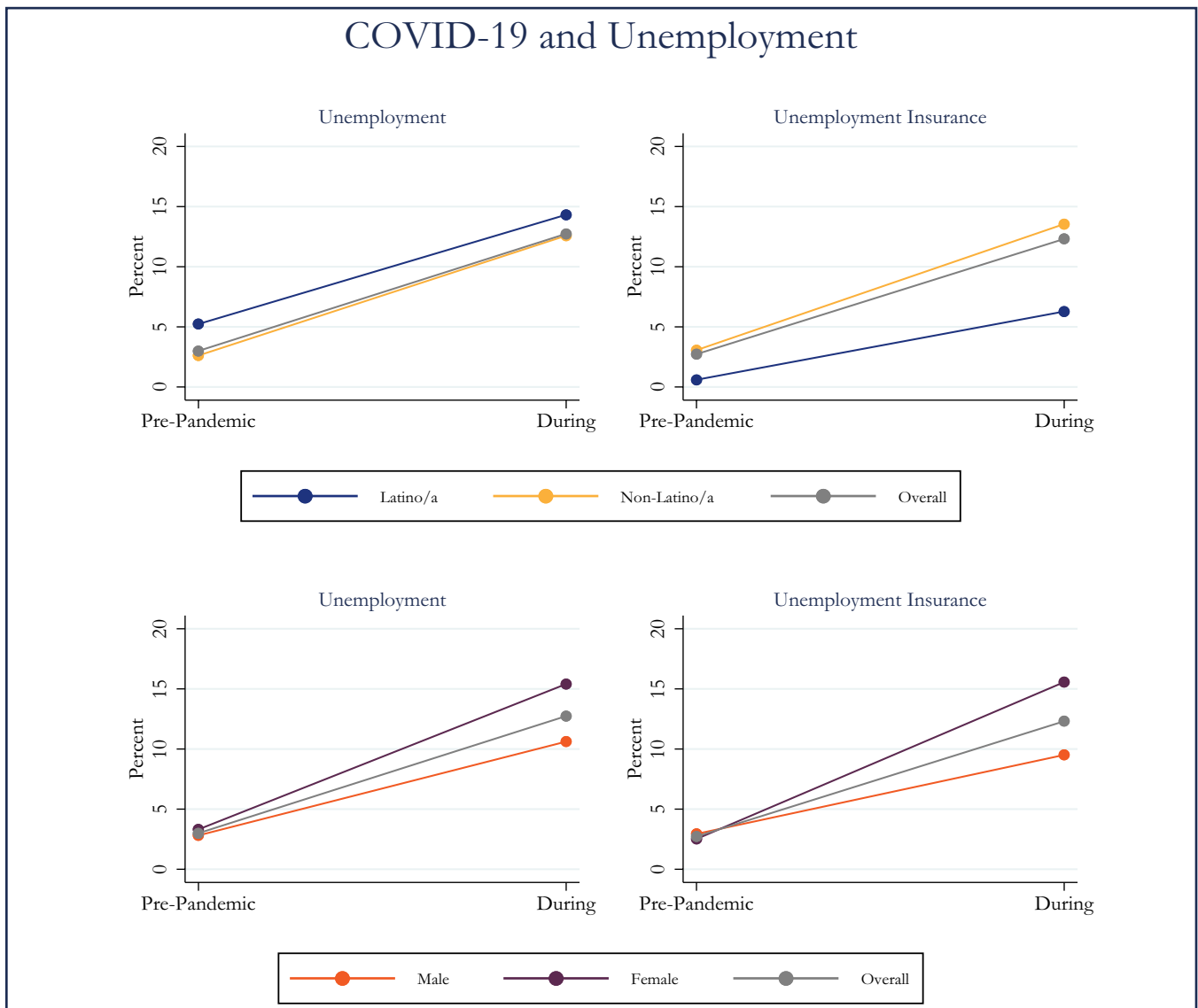
**Part time employment also saw big changes,** with 40% of those who were part time in the year prior to the pandemic being neither part time nor full time employed during the pandemic, in the month prior to the survey.

**The age group with the largest unemployment increases was, by far, the 30 to 39 year old age group,** where unemployment rose from 5% pre-pandemic to 24% at time of survey.

**Although Latino/a respondents saw large increases in unemployment, their use of unemployment insurance was dramatically less than non-Latino/a respondents.**

**Women were far more likely to be unemployed and on unemployment insurance in the month prior to the survey relative to men.**

**Survey respondents' use of credit and savings increased and decreased at a similar level as a result of the pandemic,** with around 20% reporting increases, 20% reported decreases, 52% reporting no change, and 7% reporting they did not have access to credit or savings.



**Figure 3.** Covid-19 impacted unemployment and unemployment insurance among Latino/as and women most notably. Latino/a respondents were unemployed more than non-Latino/a respondents both before and after the pandemic but their use of unemployment insurance was lower after the pandemic. Female respondents experienced greater unemployment than male respondents during the pandemic and their use of unemployment insurance was correspondingly higher.

### Policy Takeaways

Unemployment Insurance is underutilized by Latino/a members of the population. This may worsen as access to expanded unemployment insurance decreases or expires.

A large portion of those in prime working age, many of whom likely have children, remained unemployed at the time of the survey. The expiration or reduction in temporary unemployment insurance benefits will likely cause significant financial impact among this group.

## ***Impacts to Healthcare, Housing, and Informal Support***

**Among respondents who were not previously insured, 27% gained health coverage since the pandemic began.** Among respondents who had health insurance coverage during the previous year, 5% lost coverage since the pandemic began.

**The large majority of those surveyed reported that they lived in a place that they considered to be permanent and stable housing both before and during the pandemic.** A total of 97% reported so before the pandemic and 96% reported so during, reflecting a small decrease between the two periods.

However, 19% of all respondents reported that since the pandemic began, one or more people had moved into their household.

While 17% of non-Latino/a's reported that another person had moved into their household, 31% of Latino/a's reported that this was the case.

**Both before and during the pandemic, there was widespread use of care networks** (i.e. individuals who reported that they either gave or received financial support from friends or family). But while many reported giving assistance (37% before the pandemic, 38% during the pandemic), far fewer reported receiving assistance (7% before the pandemic, 9% during the pandemic).

**Latino/a's gave financial assistance to family or friends at higher rates**, with 43% reporting they did so before the pandemic, increasing to 52% during the pandemic, compared to non-Latino/a's, 36% of who reported giving both before and 35% during the pandemic.

**Younger people relied on financial assistance from friends and family at much higher rates than older people**, with nearly 17% of 18-29 year olds receiving assistance before the pandemic, up to 23% during the pandemic.

**Of households that have children younger than 16 years old, 18% did not have access to high-speed internet in their homes.**



## *Policy Takeaways*

The relatively small loss of healthcare coverage despite significant growth in unemployment, along with a major increase in coverage among the previously uninsured suggests that individuals are obtaining healthcare through non-workplace-based plans. This mirrors a national surge in enrollments in federal and state-based health insurance plans.

The relatively small impact of the pandemic on reported housing security through July 2020 likely speaks to the near-term success of eviction moratoria and supplemental income made available through the CARES Act. However, the expiration of these benefits will likely increase housing insecurity. The fact that nearly a fifth of people had at least one other person move into their home since the pandemic began suggests heightened levels of mobility and wide use of care networks to maintain secure housing.

Many rural Westerners - especially Latino/a's - support their friends and family with financial assistance and a place to stay. This broad use of informal support networks suggests that even those whose income or housing is not directly affected by the pandemic (e.g. through loss of a job or an eviction) may nevertheless experience an added burden as a result of providing for others.

That high-speed internet is only available in 85% of homes with school-aged children suggests that online-only education is not readily available to all families across the rural American West. If schools in the rural West move to an online only learning format, efforts should be made to increase accessibility of technology.

## Recovery and Outlook

### ***Political Attitudes about Local, State and Federal Government***

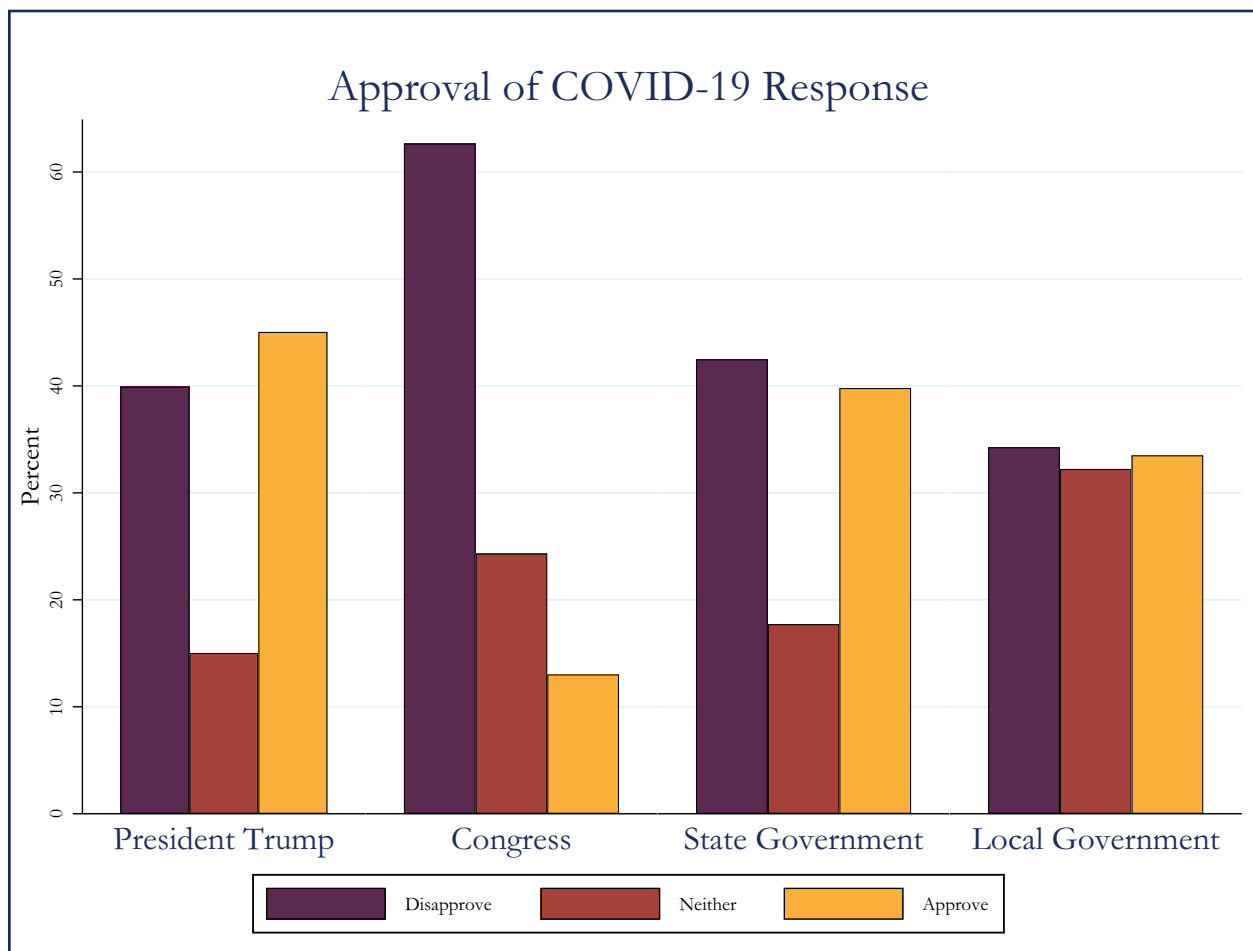
**There is strong support for government spending across a range of areas, including rent/mortgage relief, healthcare, small businesses, farmers, and infrastructure.**

79% want increased spending for small businesses, 64% want increased spending on healthcare, 66% want more relief for farmers, and 55% want more spending on infrastructure. When combined with support for keeping spending the “same,” these numbers were much higher: 81% want the same or increased government spending towards rent or mortgage relief. Support is largely bipartisan across these areas.

**A large majority (78%) of rural Westerners want the same or an increased amount of government relief paid directly to individuals.** A little over half of all respondents would like an increase in these direct payments. Overall, support is bipartisan and generally strongest among the unemployed.

**Rural Westerners want a decrease in government spending for only two areas, (1) large businesses and (2) oil and gas companies.** 63% want less government spending for large businesses and 56% want less for oil and gas companies.

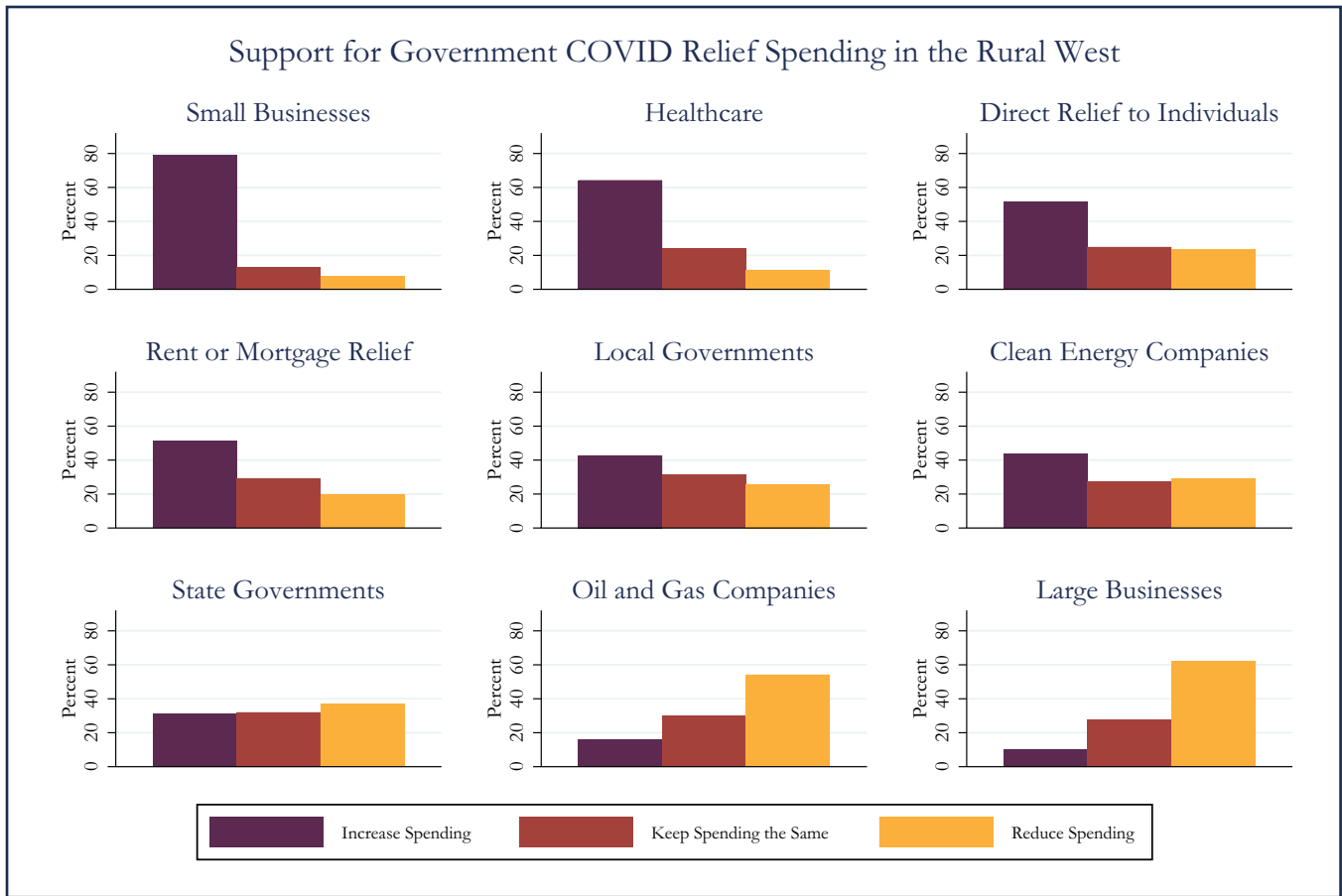
**Approval for the handling of the pandemic is lowest for members of Congress, with 61% of respondents disapproving of their performance.** Approval and disapproval rates, respectively, are more split for President Trump (43% vs. 44%), respondents’ governor (40% vs. 43%), and respondents’ local elected officials (28% vs. 39%).



**Figure 4.** This figure shows approval for different forms of government in their handling of the pandemic. Congress fared the worst, while President Trump and state governments saw an even split between approval and disapproval. Local government was even across the board.

### *Policy Takeaway*

Rural communities in the West have always relied heavily on federal government programs, receiving more federal funding per capita than what they pay in federal taxes. Yet, at the same time, rural Westerners have traditionally expressed attitudes that are fiercely self-reliant and anti-federalist. The findings from our survey suggest that Covid-19 pandemic has impacted these attitudes, revealing that rural Westerners openly support sustained – and even increased – government spending.



**Figure 5.** This figure shows relative support for government relief spending in the rural West by political affiliation. Several themes emerge including strong, bipartisan support for funding for small businesses, health, direct subsidies, and housing. However, there is stronger support among Democrats for all types of spending including state and local government and renewable energy. There is strong, bipartisan opposition to government relief spending for oil and gas and large businesses.



## ***Environmental and Natural Resource Development***

**Attitudes about local forms of natural resource development do not appear to be impacted by the pandemic.** Respondents' views on various issues (e.g. renewables, oil and gas, and tourism) remained constant whether they reported that their lives were negatively impacted by the pandemic or not.

**Only four types of natural resource development received majority support from rural Westerners:** Farming and ranching (81%) was strongest, followed by solar (67%), wind (59%), and tourism (57%). Weakest support was expressed for logging (41%), mining (35%), and oil and gas (40%).

**Support for different types of natural resource development fell along the expected political divisions,** with Republicans expressing far more support for extractive activities such as logging and mining than Democrats, and Democrats expressing far more support for clean energy such as wind and solar than Republicans.

### ***Policy Takeaway***

Residents of the rural West favor forms of natural resource development beyond the extractive forms historic to the region.

## ***Community, Trust, and Social Belonging***

**Rural West residents feel a strong sense of belonging and connection to their communities, even amidst the pandemic.**

**Respondents reported feeling respected and supported by their families and neighbors overall:** Nearly two-thirds of people feel supported and respected in their community. 70% think that people in the community care about each other. 67% think they can count on relatives and friends if their household needs help and 63% think others they do not know would help out in an emergency.

**There is recognition of social differences within communities:** 45% see their community as characterized by divides in the community based on income, ethnic background, age or gender.

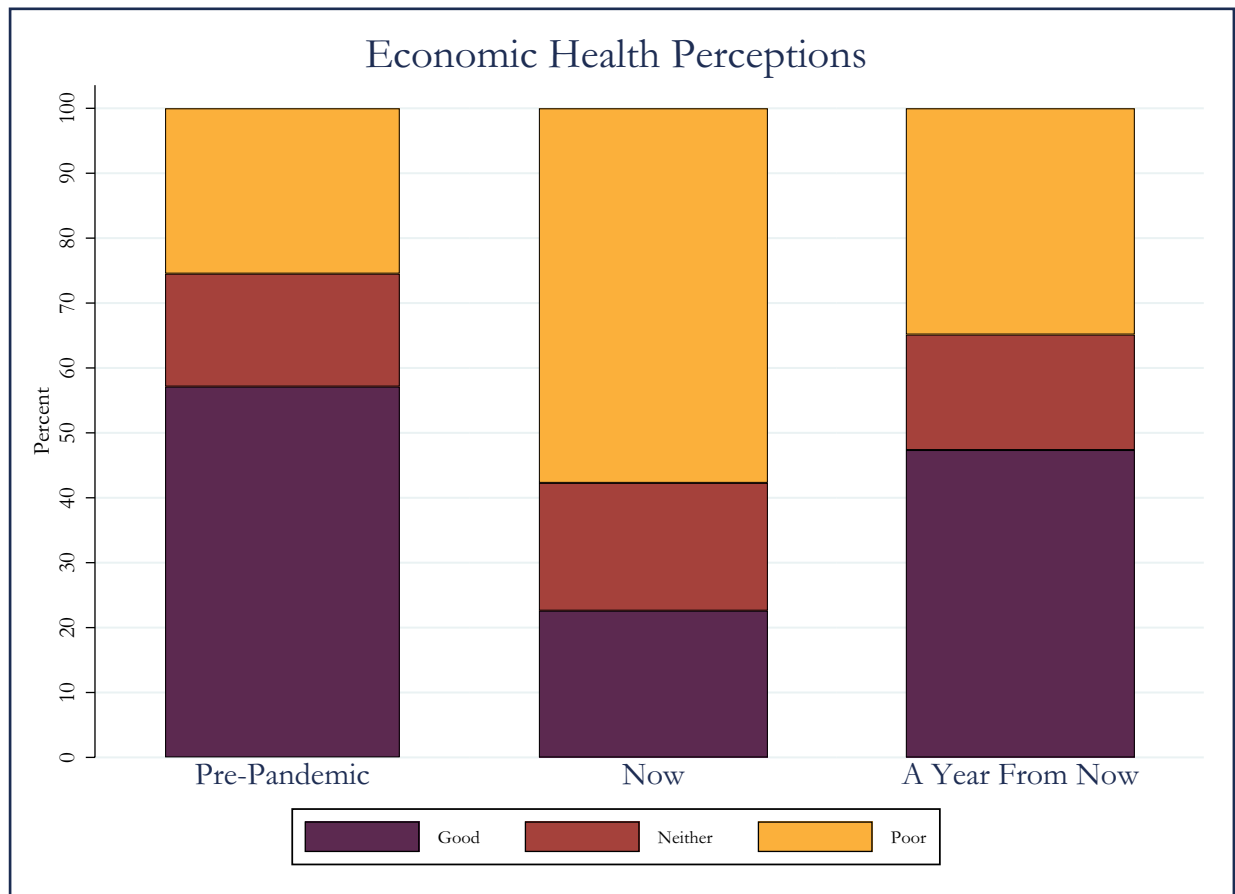
**A majority think most want to make their communities a better place:** 75% see most people as trying to make their community a good place to live and 58% think people in their community work together to solve problems.

## Outlook for the Future

**Rural Westerners expect an economic rebound.** On a scale from 1 – extremely poor to 7 – extremely good, respondents rated their counties economic health as good (4.7) before the pandemic, poor at the time of survey (3.3), and reported they expected it to rebound (4.2) to slightly good by this time next year.

**Those with lower levels of educational attainment were far more likely to report their county would be in good economic health by this time next year.**

**Republicans were more bullish on their county’s economy.** They were far more likely to report their county was in good economic health before the pandemic (Republicans=66%, Democrats=52%), in good economic health at the time of survey (Republicans=28%, Democrats=17%), and will be in good health a year from now (Republicans=62%, Democrats=32%).



**Figure 6.** Many residents of the rural West expect an economic rebound a year from now, with Republicans most optimistic about the recovery.

## Methods

The Covid-19 Rural West Survey was developed by researchers at Yale University, Utah State University, and New York University, and funded by the National Science Foundation (Award # 2029990: “RAPID: Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Rural Attitudes about Federal Aid and Recovery”). The survey was fielded by FM3 Research. The data in this executive summary are based on a representative survey of 1,009 residents of rural counties in the Western United States. The survey was conducted from June 25 to July 22, 2020, amidst the height of the summer spike in cases. Survey respondents are from rural West counties, defined as the counties classified as non-metropolitan by the Office of Management and Budget, from the following states: AZ, CA, CO, ID, MT, NV, NM, OR, UT, WA, WY. The survey was dual-mode, using both phone and internet surveys, and address-based, locating respondents randomly by address. We offered the survey in English and Spanish. The survey oversampled for hard-to-reach groups including Native Americans, Latino/as, and young adults. To ensure the data was representative to the population of sample counties, these results have been weighted by gender, age, ethnicity, and state. The margin of sampling error is  $\pm 3.1\%$  at the 95% confidence level. Election proportions come from the MIT Election Data and Science Lab dataset “County Presidential Election Returns 2000-2016”, <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/VOQCHQ> (v.3, 8/20/2020).

### Research Team

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