DIFFERENT GEOGRAPHICAL REPRESENTATIONS

OF MIDDLE AMERICA

by

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Abstract

The 2008 presidential election and Sarah Palin's use of the term "real" America sparked a national debate about whether this concept further divided the nation into two distant parts, Red America and Blue America. For many the term Red America is meant to speak to "average" Americans who live in "average" places and earn "average" incomes. This is a major issue because the idea that "real" American places are a common occurrence is incorrect. Using an extensive literature review and advanced GIS techniques this study uses general social data to isolate actual geographic areas based on normative archetypes from political discourse, areas referred to as "real" and "fake" America. The study also challenged the notion of "real" America by finding the most "average" American places, the areas that best reflect the nation as a whole, and produced an "average" American landscape. The final part of the study compared these outputs and deciphered whether an area's 'realness or averageness' has a connection to recent political voting trends. To be clear the point of the study is not to find a place to label the 'real America', the point is to use the search itself as a means to demonstrate a problem. The question is not does the "real" America exist, there will be places that closely resemble the concept, the question is whether or not the "real" America speaks to a sizable percentage of the US population, and whether or not it describes the living conditions of the 'average American'.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Every fall, ESPN kicks off the return of football by broadcasting an inaugural high school game. In 2009 the contest featured teams from two small towns in rural Iowa. The marquee team was from Parkersburg, chosen to play after a former player murdered their iconic coach. Throughout the course of the game the announcers commented on the 'authenticity' of this small town. Early in the third quarter one of the announcers described the town as "true" working class America, where people are steadfast in their morals, and where the entire town shuts down for a high school football game. He paused and said, "This is the real America" (Spielman, 2009). I sat there wondering, is it? Is Parkersburg, Iowa an idealized contemporary example of the 'real' United States? And what does it reflect about the nation as a whole?

Real is defined as "existing or occurring in the physical world; not imaginary, fictitious, or theoretical; actual" (Harper Collins, 2011). The term 'real America' cannot be defined as succinctly because its exact definition varies depending on whom you ask. Many scholars have hypothesized that the term stems from a romantic view of the iconic American landscape. Some conservatives, such as Glen Beck, have used the term in a negative context to blame America's social issues on a 'less real' part of the country that does not understand what it is to be an American. Sarah Palin claimed that the "real" America is found in small towns with the real hardworking and patriotic Americans. Liberals have said that this idea of the "real" America died years ago and it represents an attempt by the Republican Party to use nostalgia and a false reality to better gain the

support of a 'backwards' part of the country (Brooks, 2001). The irony about the term 'real America' is that regardless of opinion, all of the aforementioned individuals or groups would agree that at its core the term is meant to speak to how an actual, or 'average' American lives their life.

From the term's emergence in politics it was supposed to reiterate that representatives and media figures had not forgotten the 'average' American. Often in political situations the issues debated focus on the extremes, such as disputes over social programs for the impoverished or higher taxes for the wealthy. These discussions leave out the largest portion of the population and voters, the so-called "middle" class. Eventually the idea of speaking more to middle class America through the veil of 'real Americans' crossed from an abstract concept into a stereotype built not just on economics, but also on social policy and race. The common conception of the geographic representation of this is through Red and Blue states in presidential elections. The nation becomes binary, an even balance of two polarizing opposites. A nation where Reds' view Blues' as less American (Beck, 2003), while Blues' claim Reds' are dated and backwards (Brooks, 2001).

While there is great debate over the validity, location, and existence of the "real" America, the components that define its idealized landscape are mentioned repeatedly across literature and in the media. The "real" America is neither rich nor poor; everyone is hard-working middle class (Brooks, 2001). The "real" America is comprised of mainly farmers and manufacturers. The "real" America is predominantly white and residents never have to lock their doors. In the "real" America people have plenty of land with nice

lawns and white picket fences (Beck, 2003). The final characteristic of the "real" America is that it is "God-loving" (Brooks, 2001). The aforementioned criteria can be translated into a series of common statistics:

- Median Household Income

- Percent of Workforce involved in Manufacturing and Agriculture

- Percent White, not including White-Hispanic

- Population Density

- Percent Adhering to a Religion

It is crucial to remember that these statistics map to the imagined concepts that underlie the *romanticized* "real" America. This study takes the idealized "real" America and uses these statistics to translate it into an unbiased quantifiable approach for determining what locations most closely resemble the concept. In labeling areas as the most similar to the "real" America, the areas that are least similar to the "real" America will also be outlined; areas referred to by Jon Stewart on the Daily Show as 'Fake America'. The term 'real America' is meant to speak to the most typical Americans and places, but statistically I believe these imagined places do not resemble the current makeup of the country as a whole.

After the nation is classified in terms of "real" and "fake" America, the study isolates the true "average" America. The most American places should not be defined by any person or group's interpretation; they should represent the actual data describing the entire nation. If the term is meant to speak to the "average" American, then the *average* for the pertinent data should apply. By comparing a county's demographic and economic

makeup to national averages a place can be numerically represented based on similarity. The methodology results in a second output that produces a national landscape demonstrating the areas of the true "average" America. A secondary product of this portion of the study is the discovery of the single most American place, the best microcosm of the entire country, a place I call the 'Middle'.

The goal of this study is to examine the differences between the abstract concept of "real" America and the current makeup of the country. What is imagined as being the "real" America should not define the most American part of the country, the "real" America should be the areas that most accurately replicate and represent the true condition of the nation as a whole. The main research questions are:

- Where is the "real" America? The "fake" America?

- Where are the most "average" America places? Which county best exemplifies this "average" America?

- What is the relationship between the "real" American and "average" America landscapes?

- Do these areas follow predictable trends in recent elections?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 American Identity

The American identity is rooted in moral values, beliefs, and patriotism. For many, these ideals are guiding principles for understanding American life. Meinig (1979a, p. 42) proposed that landscapes often act as a representation of ideology. "For those who see it [landscape] as ideology may see a distinct manifestation of American interpretations of freedom, individualism, competition, utility, power, modernity, expansion, progress". These ideals manifest themselves most prominently in a range of different landscapes, and many scholars have proposed that various classic American landscapes allow for varying "interpretation[s] of overarching national or regional identities" (Groth, 1997). One of the most infamous and culturally important American landscapes is that of Main Street, the center of the classic American small town (Meinig, 1979b).

2.2 Main Street USA

The classic American Main Street is easy to visualize:

> A street, lined with three or four-story red brick business blocks, whose
> rather ornate fenestrations and cornices reveal their nineteenth century
> origins (Meinig, 1979b, p. 167).

This iconic landscape can be found perfectly reproduced at a number of locations worldwide including Anaheim, California; Paris, France; Tokyo, Japan; Hong Kong, China; and Orlando, Florida. The place is Main Street U.S.A.®, the first 'themed land'

tourists encounter upon entrance to many of the Magic-Kingdom Disney Parks (Disney, 2011). Walt Disney did not invent this landscape, the classic main street was created out of necessity in towns across the United States as a central place where citizens could congregate and purchase goods in a more agrarian society (Grant, 2006). Even during the dawn of the suburbs the Main Street layout stayed popular as urban planners separated cities through Euclidian zoning, which segmented areas into exclusively commercial, urban, or residential areas (Fulton and Shigley, 2005). Disney's main street is often referred to as the ideal downtown: and this would further what Ada Louise Huxtable claimed when she said that this celebration of iconic landscapes at locations like Disneyworld is an American phenomenon aimed at furthering the cultural significance beyond the landscape's actual importance. Baudrillard (1989) previously commented on this concept by claiming that the American need for "authentic reproduction" creates an America where the most 'real' places are forced illusions (Wortham-Galvin, 2008). It is a cyclical pattern as Americans create themed parks that dramatize the significance of a landscape, and then ultimately use the fantasy as a definition of what an actual place in the real world should look like. While the true importance of Main Street may be aided by virtue of an American phenomenon, it does not diminish the cultural significance for many Americans.

While the landscape is discussed overtly, it is often the social norms of the classic Main Street that people are most nostalgic about. The term 'real America', or other synonymous examples, is a general description of the classic American landscape, but embodied in it is also the key social characteristics that constitute the American identity:

> For many people over many decades of our national life this is the
> landscape ['Main street of Middle America'] of 'small town virtues,' the
> 'backbone of America', the 'real America' (Meinig, 1979b, p. 167).

For many, the Main Street of small town middle America is the best physical indicator
and representation of the "real" America.

2.3 American Unevenness

The classic small town, as seen in film and television, used to be the norm when
America was a young thriving agrarian nation; in 1900, 60.4% of the country lived in
rural areas (US Census Bureau, 1995). Today the population and economic prowess
stems from the cities, and much of the agricultural output consumed in the US. comes
from abroad (FATUS, 2011). In 2010, agriculture accounted for only 1% of the United
States total GDP (International Information Programs, 2010). The drastic shift in
economic power has created a major unevenness across the country in terms of economic
importance. As a result of less financial value those who live in rural areas have taken it
upon themselves to protect the true American identity against the rapidly evolving
remainder of the country:

> While national identity is at one level about 'belonging,' it is also all
> about exclusion, about keeping out those you do not like and
> identifying yourself largely in terms of who you are not. It's about
> establishing a purified link between 'blood and soil' (Mitchell, 2000, p.
> 262).

As a result of globalization, the cities have become more connected in a kind of
"McWorld", a place where "we all eat the same things, watch the same shows, and
pursue the same desires the world over" (Mitchell, 2000). Embodied best in popular
conservative attitudes, the classic "real" America is resistant to this change. "In Red

America churches are everywhere. In Blue America Thai restaurants are everywhere" (Brooks, 2001). Real Americans love their country and their way of life as is and would prefer to revert back to some earlier 'golden' time. The sentiment creates a divide in the nation and leaves those resisting with a feeling of patriotic superiority. This is something American politicians have attempted to capitalize on and exploit for years.

2.4 Real Politics

Humans have naturally found and coexisted in groups since the dawn of man (Alford, 1994). These groups were created out of safety and hunting needs but often rallied around common ideas and ideals for fear of isolation. This innate human need for inclusion in the 'group' has been exploited by politicians and other leaders for centuries. The best of these strategies alienate the least and encompass the most. Ronald Reagan used a nostalgic look at the past throughout his campaign as a plan for the future. Reagan believed in putting 'Main Street' in front of Wall Street. It was his way to demonstrate a commitment that government is most concerned with the economic plight of the average American. However, there are other more subtle concepts that have been demonstrated through the term. When Ronald Reagan drew the line between Main Street and Wall Street he was creating a strong cultural difference: classic Main Street was white. Reagan once said in a debate when discussing racial tension, "This was back when this country didn't even know it had a race problem" (Reagan, 1980). To many, life was better and more 'American' when the harsh racial realities were ignored and the white way of life could continue uninterrupted. If the discussion was truly just about an economic discrepancy, then the term should have been Middle class. Whether the term is 'Main

Street' or 'real America' the connotation certainly extends beyond income.

The term 'real America' reentered the mainstream vernacular and general social consciousness with the emergence of Sarah Palin, John McCain's running mate in the 2008 election. Palin's campaign for the vice-presidency in 2008 featured her mantra that she was the quintessential "average" American who wanted to represent all the "real" Americans in Washington. During a famous speech in Greensboro, NC she said:

> We believe that the best of America is not all in Washington, D.C. We believe that the best of America is in these small towns that we get to visit, and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America. This is where we find the kindness and the goodness and the courage of everyday Americans. Those who are running our factories and teaching our kids and growing our food and are fighting our wars for us (Palin, 2008).

The term 'real America' presents two main problems. For an area to be more "real", there must be an area that is less "real", or "fake". It also evokes the question of what constitutes an area earning the label of "real" America. Is the term 'real America' another way of describing a small town or is it something more complicated? While Sarah Palin was purposefully ambiguous during her depiction of the "real" America she still managed to infuse a number of stereotypes into the landscape; small towns define the "real" America, in the "real" America you can find the factories and farmers, and in the "real" America people are kind and willing to fight for their country.

Palin would later go on to describe more about the "real" America and small towns. The small towns are where you find the "good people … I grew up with these people" (Palin, 2008). The hometown of Sarah Palin is Wasilla, Alaska. Currently it is 86% white, 0.4% African American, and 4.9% Hispanic (ACS 2005-9). The minority percentages are far below national averages. Sarah Palin claims to know what a "real"

American place should look like because she came from one, but in terms of diversity her town is not on par with America as a whole. Palin is not the only well-known modern conservative with a specific view of the "real" America.

2.5 Red America

Glen Beck is an outspoken conservative who has written a book on this subject entitled "Real America". Throughout the book he discusses what it is to be a "real" American and what is not. He blames Hollywood, current politics, and overall ambivalence as reasons the country has lost touch with the true American spirit of yesteryear. He identifies the "real" America as hard working patriotic Americans who understand the importance of family and religion.

Beck makes a point to share stories from various places around the country to illustrate examples of what is and is not "real" America. Locations mentioned as "real" American are Topeka, KS; Omaha, NE; and Mt. Vernon, WA. Areas that he describes in a negative light include Malibu, CA; Morristown, NJ; Glenview, IL; and Orange, CA (Morristown and Glenview are suburbs of NYC and Chicago). There is a very distinct geographic pattern in the locations he has chosen as being more American. Topeka and Omaha are large cities, but have a general view of being smaller and are, in most ways, less significant than many other major metropolitan areas. They are also located in the center of the country and occupy the heartland. Mt. Vernon, WA is the only town listed from a liberal state but it should also be noted that Mt. Vernon is Beck's hometown. Another point is that the towns listed negatively are all wealthy; the average median household income for the four un-American towns is $91,346, close to double the

national average. The towns listed positively had an average median household income of $46,728 (ACS 2005-09). Glen Beck believes that the "real" America exists in the heartland, far from the wealthy enclaves that are typically found in the large cities.

2.6 Blue America

At the end of 2001 David Brooks wrote a piece for the Atlantic titled a 'Nation Slightly Divisible' as a response to the widening social gap in the US, most evident in the 2000 election. He approached the piece as an extremely 'blue' or liberal individual attempting to understand the other side.

> All we know, or all we think we know, about Red America is that millions and millions of its people live quietly underneath flight patterns, many of them are racist and homophobic, and when you see them at highway rest stops, they're often really fat and their clothes are too tight (Brooks, 2001, p. 2).

He uses the national election results as a means to divide the nation into either red or blue states. The stereotypes regarding both sides are discussed and the red states are portrayed in negative terms relative to the blue states. "We in the coastal Blue areas read more books and attend more plays than the people in the Red heartland. We're more sophisticated and cosmopolitan" (Brooks, 2001, p. 1). For his study he spent time in both an extremely Red and Blue area in order to compare the two (Red was Franklin County, PA; Blue was his hometown of Montgomery, MD). His conclusion was that people in the Red states are happier because they are exposed to less. The entire article promoted the idea that Red America chooses to blind itself from what it cannot hope to achieve. He claims that this is a function of pure isolation and an innate belief that real success is impossible. If you do not encounter tangible examples of more wealth than you then you

will not strive for it. He views half the nation of fitting these general characteristics and at one point infuses location to the discussion by saying "People in Red America tend to live on farms or in small towns or small cities far away from the coasts"(Brooks, 2001, p. 1). His article outlines very well the extremes in the debate over the real America.

The term 'real America' succeeds by playing on the concept of America as a nation that has a shared set of memories, ideas, and symbolic landscapes that bind a people together (Meinig, 1979b). People want to maintain a connection to their past as a country. Globalization and the accelerated development of the major metropolises in the US have created a strong divide in the sentiments of the nation. This idea became most evident and tied to location during the 2000 presidential election with the constant fixation on the political map. These depictions led to a general sentiment that the nation is split into two very different groups, with different ideals and agendas. The output of this study of the "real" and "fake" America map should mimic this belief as conservative politics are tailored to the "real" demographic. The "average" America output is more complicated as the more a location acts as a microcosm of the nation as a whole, the more evenly split the election results should be. If the nation is evenly split in politics, then the most "average" American places should be too.

Chapter 3

Methods and Data Sources

3.1 Choosing the Variables

A three-step methodology was used to describe the 3,141 counties of the US in terms of the aforementioned conceptualizations of "real" and "average" America. The county was chosen as the unit of analysis because of their relatively large number, longstanding and documented boundaries, and relatively compact shapes (compared to census tracts, census block groups and ZIP codes, for example). The following subsections describe the GIS procedures and geospatial data employed at each step of this methodology in more detail and reflects on the impacts of relying on the county as the unit of analysis.

Five variables were chosen for this study and used to derive the "real" and "average" America benchmarks. The higher the percentages of manufacturing and agriculture, white, and religious adherence the more 'real' a place is, so the maxima in these categories correspond to more "real". The service industries ("Joe the Plummer") and teachers were not included in the study since they do not make one town more American than another as they exist everywhere. Different criteria were needed to derive "real" America benchmark values for population density and income as will be explained below. The national averages for all five variables were used in the "average" America output and only the population density required a more in depth calculation.

Trying to numerically represent the "real" America in terms of its population density is difficult. There is no specific value that represents the correct density for a

"real" America place. Hence, the Forbes list of the best small cities to raise a family was consulted and used to pick the benchmark. These are the places that "parents look for to settle down" and provide a good method for translating what a real America place should look like, in terms of physical attributes, into a quantified estimate of population density. The cities on the list had to have a population below 100,000 and were selected based on average incomes, low costs, and short commute times. Of the 15 included in the list I took the nine from unique states and used the county's overall (i.e. average) population density. This value (82.1 people per square mile) constitutes the benchmark for this attribute in the "real" America.

Finding the correct national average for population density in the "average" America output is also challenging. One option was to take the entire population divided by the total area of the US. This creates a skewed view towards the more rural areas as much of the country remains sparsely inhabited. The same is true if you take the average population density of all the counties since the counties vary drastically in terms of population. If the goal of the study is to find the most American place, based on the way most Americans live, then the average America population density should be equally reflective of the entire population. The best approach was to use a weighted median where the weight is the population and the result is a value that counts every person but is not influenced by outliers. The "average" America population density used in the study is 1,269.7 persons per square mile.

The most discussed variable in the literature is the idea of "real" America being middle class. The median household income is most often used to characterize wealth

because it is less sensitive to outliers than a mean calculation. The average of the median

household income for the 3,141 counties is $43,475 and this value was used as the "real" America benchmark value. However if the US is treated as a single population independent of geography the median household income is $51,425. This was the value used as the "average" America benchmark value.

The classic American is often portrayed as extremely hard working, and the two most infamous American job sectors are manufacturing and farming. During the pregame show for the 2011 Super Bowl a number of people joined together in various locations to read the US Constitution. Two of the groups were placed on a rural working farm and in a car factory (Ackerman and Levy, 2011). Even in 2011 people still associate the classic American jobs with manufacturing and agriculture. This has become a myth of late as only 1.8% of the US workforce is involved in agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting, and mining while 11.2% is involved in manufacturing. Therefore summing these categories gave a national average of 13.0%. Since "real" Americans 'run our factories' and 'grow our food' the maximum value of 48% in Slope, ND, was used for the "real" America benchmark.

While there is substantial variation in the racial composition by region, it is clear that the US is now a very diverse place. The Hispanic population is 15%, Black population is 12.4%, and White is only 65%. In some states, such as California, the white population no longer represents a simple majority. Much of the literature hinted at the underlying 'whiteness' of the "real" America, so the maximum 100% was used for this

benchmark. To derive the current national average required the separation of Hispanic whites from the remainder of the White population. The white Hispanic population was

subtracted from the total White population. This calculation results in the total non-Hispanic white population. The national average of non-Hispanic White is 65.1% and this was used as the "average" benchmark.

The final variable to be included is religion. Even though the US constitution was based on separating church and state, the US is an extremely religious country. In fact, a majority of Americans claim that religion plays an important part in their everyday life, a statistic that is counter to other comparable developed nations (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2002). Generally as a nation becomes more developed, the less emphasis the general population puts on faith. There is an overall negative relationship globally between religiosity and economic prosperity (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2002). There is also a wide diversity of religions in the US and the country was founded on the principle of supporting religious freedom; thus, it is unfair to select one religion to represent the variable above all others. Therefore the variable chosen in this study was the percent of adherence to any religion. The national average for percent adherence is 62.7% and this was used as the "average" America benchmark. The "real" America is 'God-Loving', so the maximum (100%) was used as the benchmark for this group.

3.2 Data Sources and Choice of County as Unit of Analysis

The original motivation of the study was to locate the most average American town. While much of the data is available at the level of individual cities and towns, two

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variables, the 2010 federal election results and religious adherence information were only available at the county scale. The decision was therefore made to use the county as the

primary unit of analysis and the majority of the data inputs used for this research were taken from Esri Business Analyst demographic data (Esri, 2010). Esri demographic data is derived from census, ACS community survey data, and a number of other sources to provide some of the most accurate and up-to-date estimates of median household income, total population, percent working in manufacturing and agriculture, percent non-Hispanic and Hispanic whites by county.

The religious data came from the Association of Religious Data Archives (ARDA, 2000). This group provides county level data on religious information including total percent adherence to any religion, number of religious establishments, as well as the percent of membership for many different religious denominations in 2000 (the most recent set of religious adherence data available at the county level). The data used in this research was the percent adherence with an adjusted rate that takes into account that much of their surveying missed specific groups characterized by certain racial backgrounds and religious affiliations (ARDA, 2000). Their research found that the adjusted percent adherence should be 63% instead of the originally calculated 50%. The final component of the data was the results of the last three elections (National Atlas, 2011). The data was downloaded in shapefile format and joined to the created database based on FIPS codes.

3.3 Data Synthesis

There were a number of different procedures that could have been used in creating a numeric representation of each county in both the "real" America and "average" America outputs. In this study the method chosen to calculate the idyllic locations relied on ranks. As outlined in the data section the benchmark values for both the "real" America and "average" America outputs are known. These values are listed in Table 1. The "average" America values represent national averages while the "real" America values represent maxima, or are the result of specific calculations as described in Section 3.1.

Table 1: The ideal variable values for both the "real" America and Average America outputs used in the study.

	Real America Benchmark	Average America Benchmark
% White Non-Hispanic	100.0% (Max)	64.7%
Population Density (people/ sq mile)	82.1	1,269.7
% Religious Adherence	100.0% (Max)	62.7%
Employment in Manufacturing + Agriculture	100.0% (Max)	13.0%
Median Household Income ($)	$43,745	$51,425

The methodology was based on comparing each variable for every county to the real and average America benchmark values and then ranking in descending order from 1 to 3,141 based on the differences. As an example in the real America study, Cass County in North Dakota has a population density of 82.1 and is the same and therefore closest

value to the real America benchmark value of 82.1. Cass would therefore receive a ranking of 1 in the real America study as it has the smallest difference to the benchmark. Hence the more similar a value is to the benchmark value the lower the rank will be.

For every variable the ranks range from 1 to 3,141, with the exception of the average ranks used for ties. Every county would have a rank for each of the variables examined and these could be summed for every county with the lowest combined value producing the most real or average place. The summed values for both the real America and average America value were added to ArcMap and joined to a shapefile of counties so that they could be projected and spatially interpreted.

3.4 Potential Sources of Error

Scale and aggregation are two of the biggest obstacles facing any spatial study (Openshaw, 1977). The ecological fallacy states that attributes assigned to the individual vary based on the way in which data are aggregated, and can drastically affect the accuracy of any statements that follow (Holt, 1996). There is no way to know if the unit of measurement in the study contains a collection of extremes, or one similar result and unless the data are disaggregated this conundrum will always be a potential source of error. This is the case with most human and social data that are aggregated at some level as a result of confidentiality and data management protocols.

Another source of error also occurs due to aggregation, and it is known as the modifiable area unit problem. This issue arises as there is no way to know what the homogeneity of the area being investigated actually looks like, because almost all areas

contain variables that are "modifiable at choice" or subject to change when the boundaries are redrawn. If you were to perform the same analysis at a different scale among the same population the results would vary. "As heterogeneity among units is

reduced through aggregation, the uniqueness of each unit and the dissimilarity among units is also reduced" (Young, 2002, p. 633). Hence, the way areas are grouped can have a major effect on the outcome: random groupings generally have no effect, but groupings based on proximity or one or more dependent variables can cause the inaccuracy of the results to increase. Within this study all of these sources of error present issues in deriving conclusions from the results. There is no way to speak about a county being the model for US diversity when the county could be a collection of entirely segregated and isolated towns.

Chapter 4

Results

The first map (Figure 1) shows the results of the "real" America study. The map took the summed results of the rankings and divided them into five equal quintiles. Red (Q1) corresponds to the areas most like the "real" America, and blue (Q5), is the least. The map depicts a strong concentration of "real" areas in the heartland, centered around Iowa and Minnesota. The "fake" areas have a strong hold on the I-95 corridor in the northeast and much of the west. The data table (Table 3) corresponds to the "real" America map and shows the numbers of counties in each state that fall within each of the quintiles for the "real" America output. The most "real" state was found to be Iowa with 67% of the counties falling within the most "real" quintile.

The "average" America output map (Figure 2) depicts areas shaded in red (Q1) as being the most similar to the "average" America and those in blue (Q5) as being the least similar. The most "average" American places occur in the major cities and their suburbs. The data table (Table 4) corresponds to the "average" America map and shows the numbers of counties in each state that fell within each of the quintiles for the "average" America output. The most "average" state is Delaware, with 100% of the counties falling within the most "average" quintile.
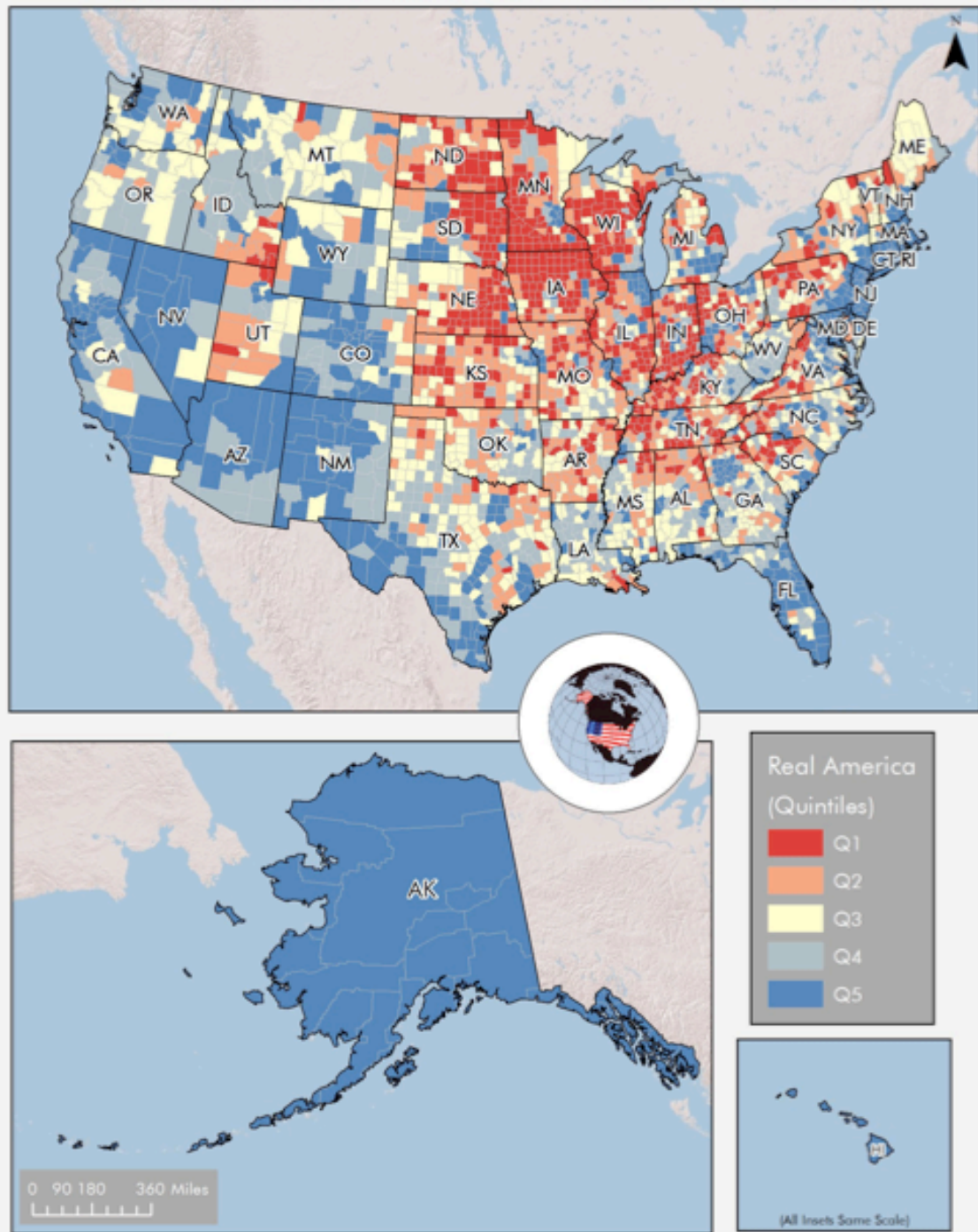
Figure 1: Map depicting real America. The red (Quintile 1) shows the 20% of counties that are most like the real America and the blue (Quintile 5) shows the 20% of counties least like the real America.

Table 2: The "real" America study results by state showing the distribution of counties by quintile. Many states contain no representation in the most "real" class while others have a majority of their counties within the most "real" class.

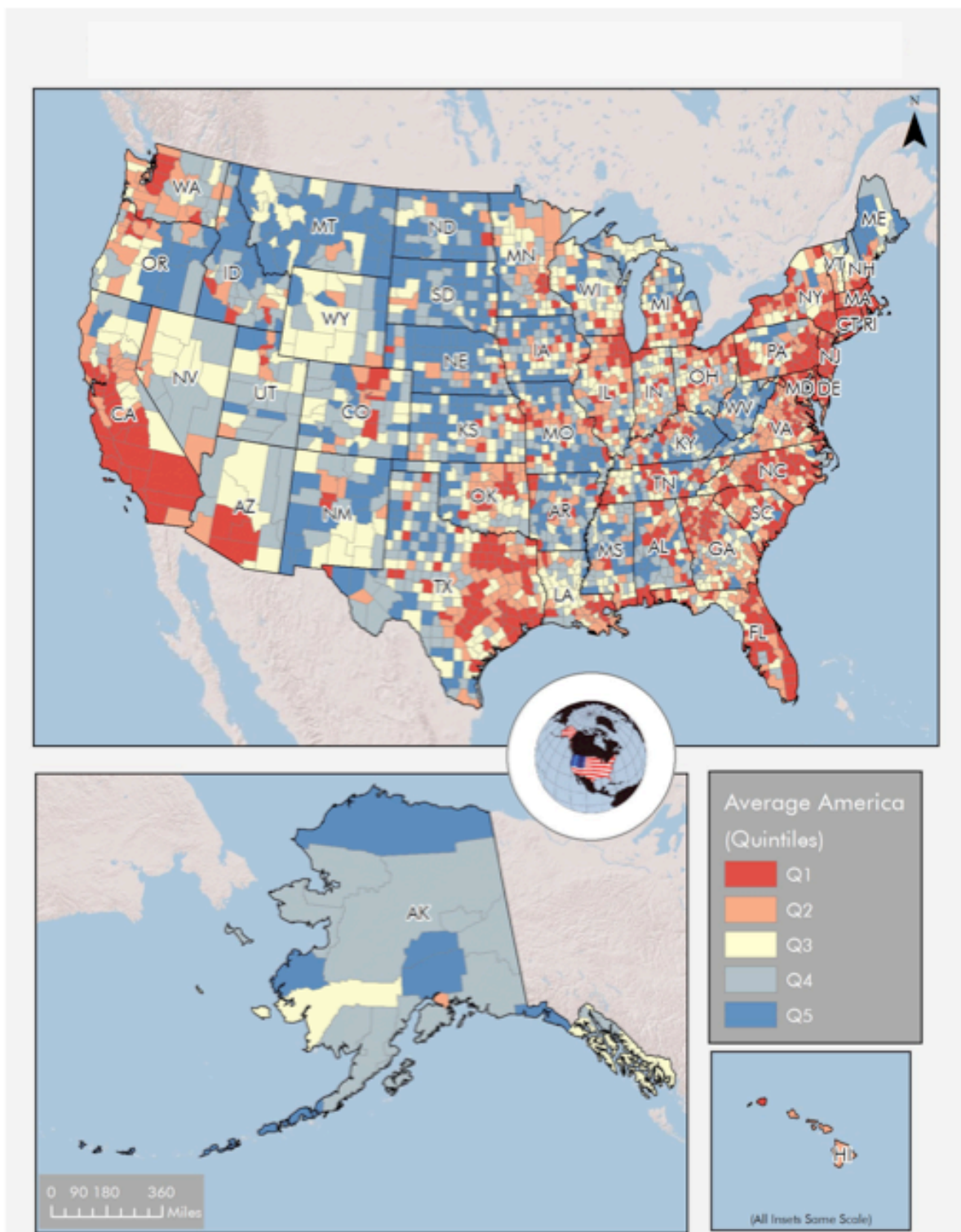| State	Most Real 1	2	3	4	Least Real 5	% Most Real	Total
Iowa	66	20	4	5	4	67%	99
Minnesota	53	13	6	7	8	61%	87
Wisconsin	38	12	8	11	3	53%	72
Indiana	45	16	6	12	13	49%	92
South Dakota	30	10	7	10	9	45%	66
North Dakota	24	17	8	3	1	45%	53
Nebraska	42	28	15	5	3	45%	93
Tennessee	38	24	18	8	7	40%	95
Kentucky	45	25	18	24	8	38%	120
Illinois	37	28	8	12	17	36%	102
Ohio	26	16	14	14	18	30%	88
Pennsylvania	18	13	11	11	14	27%	67
South Carolina	11	11	13	3	8	24%	46
Kansas	25	47	21	7	5	24%	105
Missouri	25	43	26	12	9	22%	115
Arkansas	14	29	21	10	1	19%	75
Michigan	13	19	21	17	13	16%	83
Vermont	2	3	8		1	14%	14
Idaho	6	11	9	14	4	14%	44
North Carolina	11	21	25	27	16	11%	100
Alabama	7	22	20	12	6	10%	67
Virginia	14	17	26	30	47	10%	134
Utah	3	9	8	4	5	10%	29
New Hampshire	1	1	2	2	4	10%	10
Mississippi	8	14	33	19	8	10%	82
New York	6	18	11	7	20	10%	62
Georgia	7	30	44	46	32	4%	159
West Virginia	2	10	12	23	8	4%	55
Louisiana	2	4	20	30	8	3%	64
Oklahoma	2	21	26	23	5	3%	77
Texas	6	45	70	81	52	2%	254
Montana	1	8	23	15	9	2%	56
Alaska					27	0%	27
Arizona				8	7	0%	15
California		1	7	15	35	0%	58
Colorado		4	5	22	33	0%	64
Connecticut					8	0%	8
Delaware					3	0%	3
District of Columbia					1	0%	1
Florida		1	7	19	40	0%	67
Hawaii					5	0%	5
Maine		5	7	3	1	0%	16
Maryland		4	1	5	14	0%	24
Massachusetts		1	1	2	10	0%	14
Nevada			1	2	14	0%	17
New Jersey					21	0%	21
New Mexico			3	11	19	0%	33
Oregon		2	14	15	5	0%	36
Rhode Island				2	3	0%	5
Washington		3	12	12	12	0%	39
Wyoming		2	8	8	5	0%	23
Total	628	628	628	628	629		3141

Figure 2: Map depicting average America. The red (Quintile 1) shows the 20% of counties that are most like the average America and the blue (Quintile 5) shows the 20% of counties least like the average America.

Table 3: The "average" America study results by state showing the distribution of counties by quintile. Four states contained no representation in the most "average" class while all of the counties in Delaware were classified in the most average quintile.

State	Most Average 1	2	3	4	Least Average 5	% Most Average	Total
Delaware	3					100%	3
Connecticut	5	3				63%	8
Rhode Island	3	1	1			60%	5
New Jersey	11	3	2	3	2	52%	21
New York	28	15	10	3	6	45%	62
North Carolina	43	32	14	8	3	43%	100
Massachusetts	6	1	6	1		43%	14
Pennsylvania	28	13	12	8	6	42%	67
Maryland	10	6	7		1	42%	24
South Carolina	18	13	5	6	4	39%	46
Florida	26	23	15	2	1	39%	67
New Hampshire	3	3	2	2		30%	10
Georgia	46	46	38	17	12	29%	159
Virginia	38	39	25	18	14	28%	134
Oklahoma	21	17	18	13	8	27%	77
Texas	67	55	45	41	46	26%	254
Tennessee	23	12	22	20	18	24%	95
Illinois	23	34	25	14	6	23%	102
California	13	16	18	8	3	22%	58
Ohio	19	20	19	26	4	22%	88
Alabama	14	13	9	16	15	21%	67
Arizona	3		5	6	1	20%	15
Louisiana	12	19	16	14	3	19%	64
Missouri	20	17	15	31	32	17%	115
Oregon	6	6	8	7	9	17%	36
Arkansas	12	7	9	29	18	16%	75
Kentucky	19	20	16	26	39	16%	120
Michigan	13	19	18	25	8	16%	83
Washington	6	14	9	10		15%	39
Vermont	2	7	3	1	1	14%	14
Wisconsin	10	11	25	15	11	14%	72
Maine	2	2	5	3	4	13%	16
Iowa	12	16	16	23	32	12%	99
Indiana	11	27	25	24	5	12%	92
Minnesota	10	18	18	22	19	11%	87
Idaho	5	5	7	16	11	11%	44
Mississippi	8	7	14	22	31	10%	82
Wyoming	2	4	10	4	3	9%	23
Kansas	9	20	25	27	24	9%	105
Utah	2	2	6	15	4	7%	29
Colorado	4	9	17	16	18	6%	64
Nevada	1	6	3	7		6%	17
Nebraska	5	7	15	16	50	5%	93
West Virginia	2	4	9	16	24	4%	55
New Mexico	1	5	4	10	13	3%	33
South Dakota	2	4	15	6	39	3%	66
North Dakota	1	3	5	9	35	2%	53
Alaska		1	5	7	14	0%	27
District of Columbia				1		0%	1
Hawaii		1	2	1	1	0%	5
Montana		2	9	14	31	0%	56
Total	628	628	628	628	629		3141

Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusions

5.1 Real America

In looking at the "real" America map (Figure 1) the best response may be that it is exactly where it should be. This idea of 'where it should be' stems from political results in 2000 showing the pockets of purely 'red' conservatism in the heartland, as shown in the map reproduced in Figure 3. As described by Brooks (2001), the 2000 election has come to set the standard of where the "real" America is as a result of the polarizing nature of the candidates and for how close the results were. While the map of the election shows a majority of the geography voted for Bush, the overall popular vote was in favor of Gore. The 2000 election results map shares some similarities with the "real" America map, but what is also evident in the "real" America map is the distinct concentration of the "real" America strongholds in the heartland.

For the "real" America map, the results for each county was computed independently but there is still a massive clustering of places most like the "real" America in the upper Midwest through parts of Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and into Nebraska. The red areas stretch out across Missouri, Tennessee, and Kentucky reaching as far south as the northern margins of Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama and west across Kansas and Nebraska. The red areas also extend across Pennsylvania and trickle into New York. It is an interesting pattern as the "real" America areas are centered around Wisconsin and Minnesota, states that historically represent Democratic strongholds. However the "real" America also maintains major
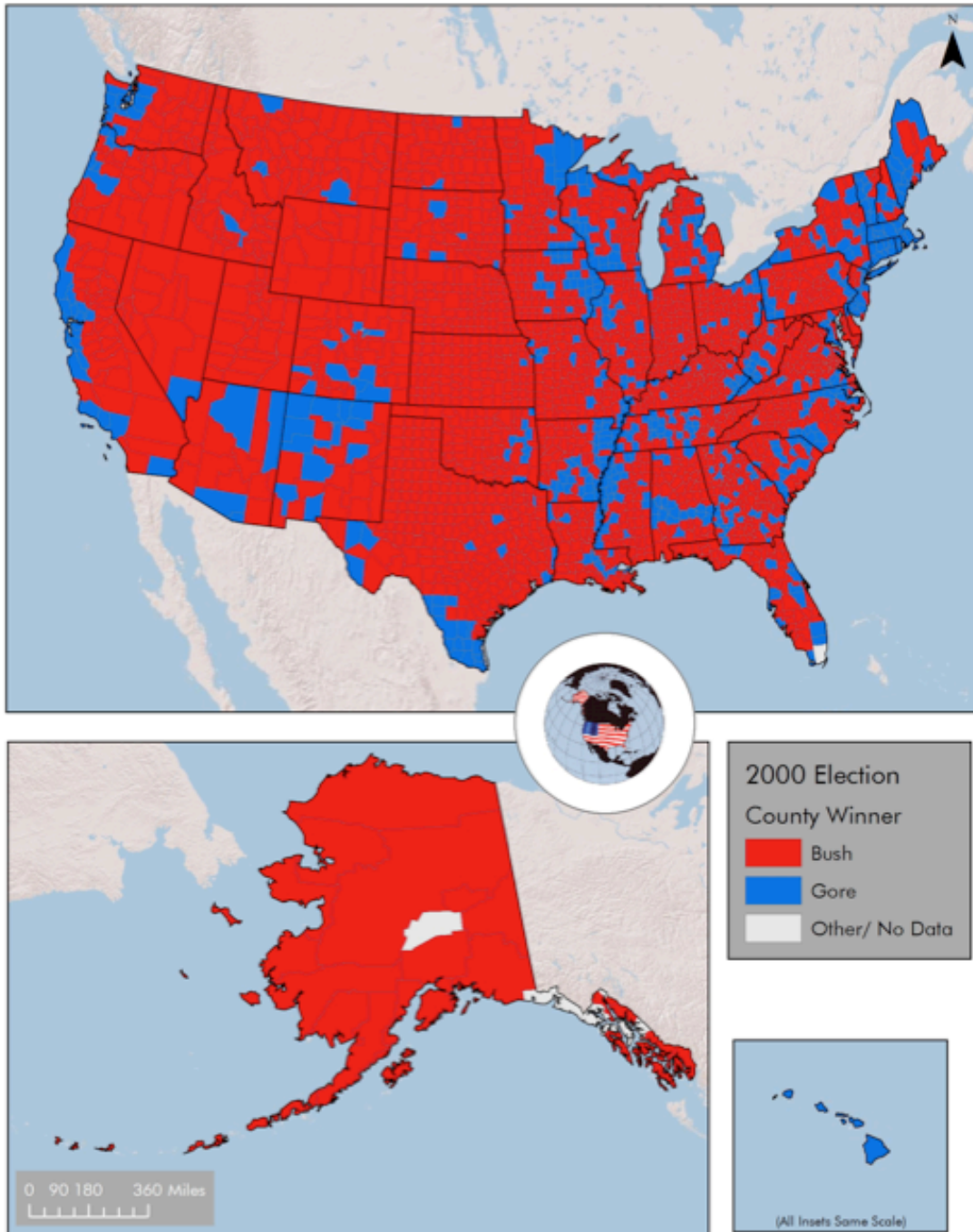
Figure 3: Map showing the 2000 Presidential election results by county. Red counties signify a majority voting for Bush while blue denotes a majority voting for Gore. Grey counties show places that were too close to call or where there were issues with the data.

control of the remainder of the Midwest, which is traditionally Republican.

The only exceptions to the areas of red or realness in the Midwest are the cities. The major metropolitan areas such as Kansas City and St. Louis stand out as islands of dark blue or "fake" America, much like the 2000 election map. Other than a pocket in Utah and southeastern Idaho, almost the entirety of the west is also "fake". Other places like sections of Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, and Connecticut in the northeast, and much of Florida, are very blue and therefore "fake". The "real" America state summary (Table 3) shows that there are entire states that represent this "fake" America, including the state of Alaska. This is particularly interesting as it is the home state of Sarah Palin, the politician who most recently used the idea of real America in a presidential campaign and reintroduced the real America vernacular to the mainstream media.

5.2 Politics

Real America is a political tool most notably used by the Republican Party. One would expect that based on the alignment of principles the areas most like the "real" America would have a tendency to vote more conservative. It would also be fair to suppose that the areas considered most "fake" would be more likely to vote liberal.

The results of the last three elections are plotted by quintiles of "real" America in Figure 4. The percentage that voted Republican was multiplied by the total population within the quintile. The top three quintiles (Q1, Q2, & Q3) voted conservative in the each of the last three elections. At the other end, the most "fake" area (Q5) voted well under 50% for the Republican Party.

5.3 Size of Real America

There is a major conception that the "real" America represents the conditions and mindset for a large portion of the population. The media often promotes this concept through a need to appeal to this estranged demographic. While areas similar to the
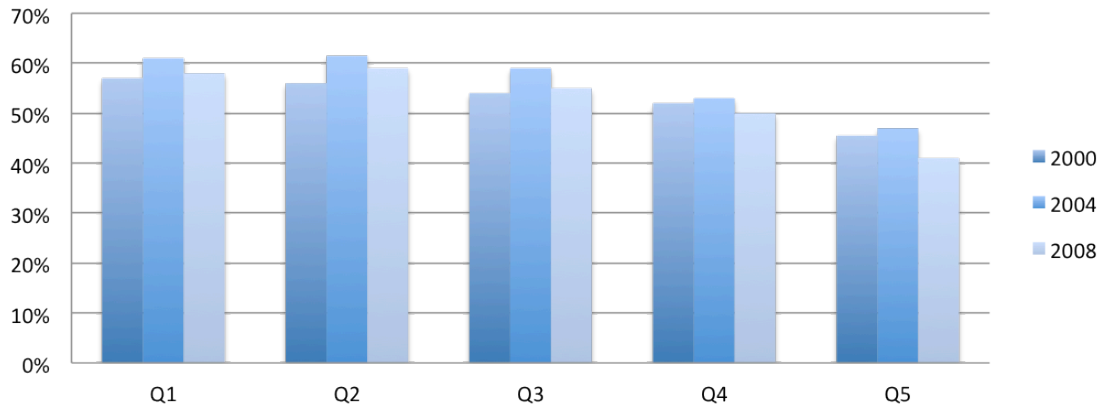

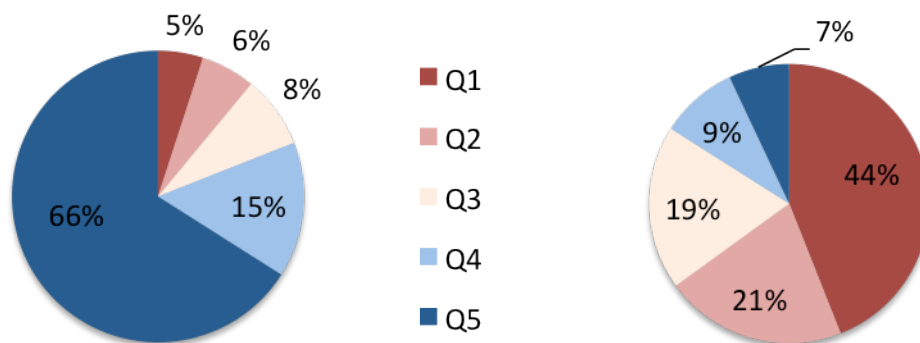Figure 4: The percent voting Republican by Real America quintile.

Figure 5 (a) shows the percentage of the US population within each of the "real" America quintiles and (b) the percentage of the population within the "average" America quintiles.

concept of the "real" America do exist as imagined, they are not very large. The pie chart reproduced in Figure 5(a) shows the percent of the population within each of the real America quintiles. The two most "real" American quintiles only contain a combined 11% of the population. On the other hand, the two most "fake" America quintiles contain 81%

29

of the population. If the "real" America is meant to speak to how an 'average American' lives, how can such a small subset of the population live in those areas?

5.4 Average America

The second pie chart reproduced in Figure 5(b) shows the distribution of the US population by "average" America quintile. The most "average" America areas are also more populous than the real America with 65% of the population living within the top two quintiles. There is a significantly larger population of people living within "average" America areas than real America, and more people live within the most "average" America quintile (i.e. the 20% of counties most representative of the "average") than any other.

The visual output of the "average" America map (Figure 2) is very surprising. The "real" America is where it was expected to be it in the heartland; however, the "average" America does not follow as discernable a pattern. Some cities represent the "average", such as Tulsa and St. Louis, but most major cities show a far different result. The map reproduced in Figure 6 shows an up-close view of the New York City metro region. At the center is Manhattan and the Burroughs which all fall in the bottom two quintiles of the "average" America output. However as one moves away from Manhattan the counties appear to become more "average". Further out still the counties begin to become less "average" again. This same pattern can be seen in the Chicago metro region (Figure 7). In Chicago the counties that represent the city center and adjacent suburbs fall in the third quintile. The next ring of counties all fall in the first or most "average" quintile but in the following ring the 'averageness' begins to subside. These two examples show how many

of the most "average" counties are small cities or the outer suburbs in major metropolitan

regions. This would match the 2000 census information showing 80% of the US

population living within urban areas and just 20% living within rural areas (US Census

Bureau, 2000).

The most "average" state is Delaware with 100% of the counties within the most

"average" America quintile. The remainder of the top five are all situated along the I-95

corridor that connects Washington, DC to Boston (like Delaware). This result was very

surprising, as this area is generally regarded as wealthy. At the county scale the wealth of

certain towns is lost based on the large number of towns that comprise a county. The

single most "average" place or 'Middle' was found to be Lucas County, OH. Lucas

County is located in the north west of Ohio, and it's seat and largest city is Toledo, the

66th largest city in the US based on population (ACS 2005-9). While the county does

provide room for interesting conclusions it does not provide the same force as if it was a

town. People identify less strongly with their county of residence than their town and

because of this the "individual" experience does not come through as strongly.

5.5 Conclusions

The point of the study was not really about finding the "real" or "average"

America. These locations are merely a means to an end. The point of the study was to

demonstrate a problem. The counties cannot de divided neatly to real and fake America,

it is far more complicated. Politicians and the media create general classifications like

this in order to sell products, ideas, and garner votes.

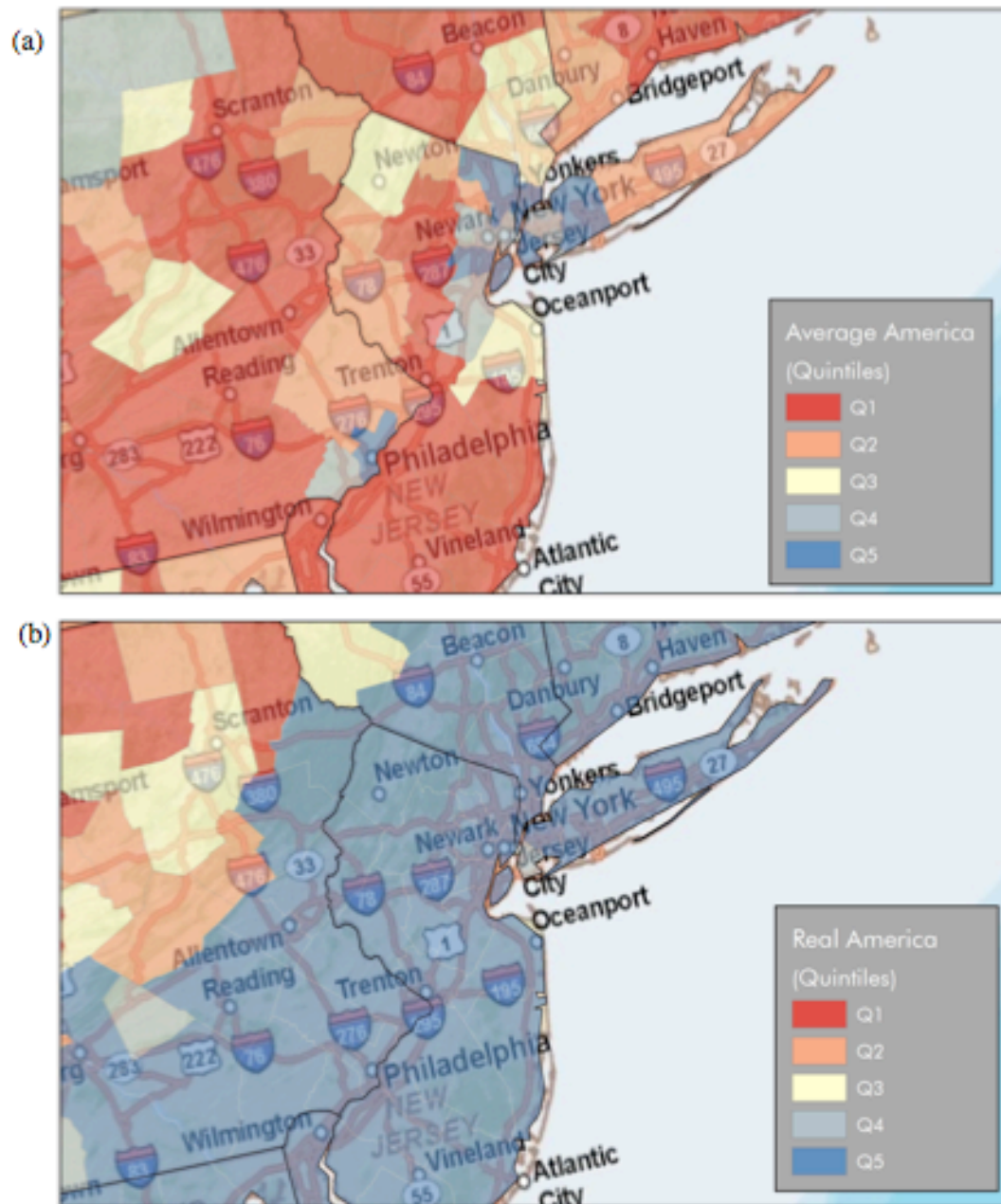The real America is real; there are a number of places that almost perfectly

Figure 6: The maps showing the (a) "average" and (b) "real" America landscapes in the the New York City metro region.
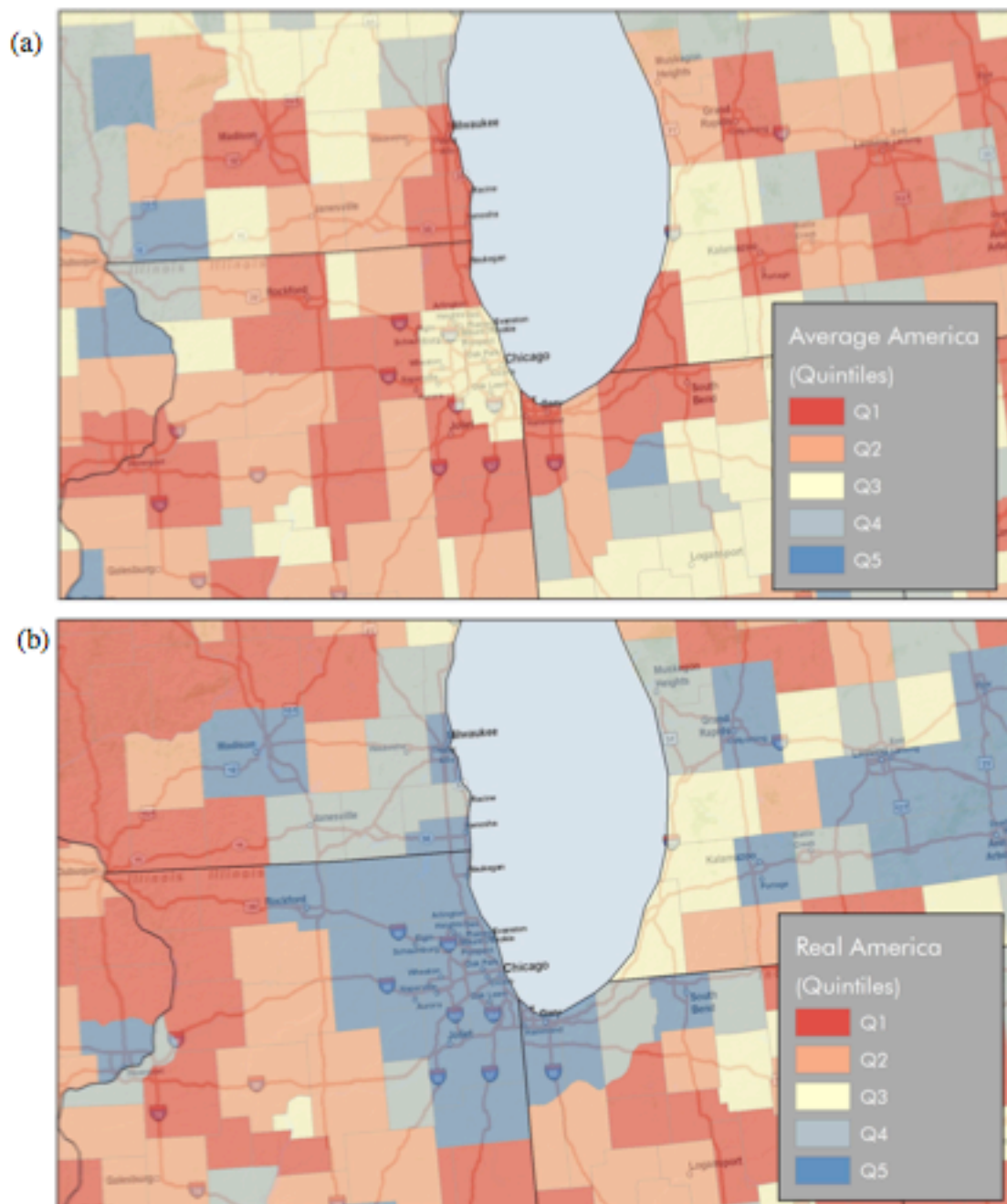
Figure 7: The maps showing the (a) "average" and (b) "real" America landscapes in the the Chicago metro region.

matched the benchmark values created to simulate the "real" America. In 2008 Sarah Palin's comments about the "real" America upset many, because it classified where they lived as "fake" America. Yet the popular media and much of the mainstream media continues to feel a need to market to this demographic even though this study found that just 5% of the US population lives within the most "real" places. On the other hand, the study found that 44% of the population lives within the 628 counties most similar to the national averages. These counties (i.e. places) are racially diverse, where not everyone is 'God-loving', and contain a range of cities and towns of various sizes.

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