



All the People, All the Places

A Landscape of Opportunity for Rural and Small-Town Civic Engagement

2018

by Ben Goldfarb



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Introduction

A growing number of foundation and nonprofit leaders have become increasingly concerned with our sector's decades-long withdrawal from rural America. These regions and communities face identical challenges to those in cities: access to quality healthcare and education, corporate disinvestment, wealth inequality, infrastructure decline, environmental degradation, and political dysfunction. Because philanthropy's attention was focused elsewhere, we failed to see not only the gathering needs and dispossession in rural and small city America, but also the abiding resiliency, resourcefulness and energy that have always been hallmarks of these communities.

Following the 2016 election, however, donors around the country are becoming more interested in examining how they might re-engage with rural towns and states. In this paper, long-time organizer and grassroots consultant Ben Goldfarb, presents a nuanced landscape analysis and strategy review, providing cogent insights for funders across the issues and challenges that affect those who live in small towns and cities. He outlines a set of options for investments by national and place-based donors and their grantees to reverse our absence.

In the near-term, Goldfarb writes, the task for foundations and nonprofits interested in rural work is to establish grounded and dialogic relationships whereby we learn about and take our cues from leaders and organizations in towns and small cities. Simply relocating urban assumptions, attitudes, organizing and advocacy models, communications, and organizational structures to the rural context is unlikely to succeed. As funders, we can work together to aggregate and align resources to more effectively resource the significant and growing challenges facing these communities—challenges that profoundly impact American society as a whole.

Numerous nonprofit and foundation leaders across the country and across sectors have informed Goldfarb's research and thinking, and we thank them for their insights and their important work. There are certainly many more people to learn from and avenues to explore. This report—and the conversations surrounding it—mark just the beginning of a longer and broader project to include rural communities in philanthropy's vision for a fair, just, and prosperous America. We hope you will join us.

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A Growing Divide, A Moral and Strategic Imperative

The 2016 election dramatically exposed a key electoral dynamic that has been developing for some time: that progressives have depleted connections to people outside major metropolitan areas. In stark contrast to the voting patterns of much of the 20th century, when farm/labor coalitions drove progressive policies at the state and federal levels, the urban/rural voter- and cultural divide has unquestionably become an increasingly important factor in electoral and public policy outcomes.

There are significant moral and strategic challenges implicit in this reality for those invested in a just and equitable society, exacerbated by a correlated long-term decline in philanthropic investment, and diminishing civil society infrastructure outside of major metropolitan areas. While the path forward to reverse these trends will not be short, there should be no doubt that there are meaningful opportunities before us right now that can build on the expertise and good work of those in the field, engage new stakeholders, and experiment with innovative organizing methodologies.

To be clear, this is not a case for an investment frame that places rural over urban or white working-class engagement over communities of color. Those false choices mask genuine diversity outside of major metropolitan areas and divert us from the real work of building the level of power we need to make large-scale change. Instead, this paper is meant to lift up the importance and possibility of building civic engagement capacity in rural and small-town communities as part of a holistic, state-level approach. In so doing, we might make possible the connections and sense of deep interdependence we need to achieve a more equitable society.

A Note on “Rural” and “Small-Town”

While it would be useful to have a tidy, quantitative definition of what we mean by “rural” and “small-town,” there are multiple, sometimes contradictory, definitions currently in use in different contexts.¹ For the purposes of this project, we are generally talking about areas that would be considered “non-metro” by the OMB—those without a central urbanized area of at least 50,000 people. That said, the USDA’s rural-urban continuum codes provide significant nuance underneath that broad definition and are referenced at various points in this paper.²

The OMB’s “Micropolitan Statistical Area” designation is also a key framework for strategic and tactical reasons.³ “Micropolitan” areas include at least one town between 10,000-50,000 population plus the adjacent areas that have a high degree of social and economic integration. As we’ll discuss later, these regional centers are more likely to have experienced some level of diversification, offer opportunities for multiracial organizing and are often key drivers in state legislative politics.

¹ <https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2008/june/defining-the-rural-in-rural-america/>

² <https://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/rural-urban-continuum-codes/documentation/>

³ “2010 Standards for Delineating Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas.” Office of Management and Budget.

https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/omb/assets/fedreg_2010/06282010_metro_standards-Complete.pdf

Finally, just as relevant as any quantitative definition, is the underlying idea of “rural consciousness” as defined by Political Scientist Katherine Cramer: a growing and deeply-held belief that rural areas are ignored by decision-makers, do not get their fair share of resources, and that rural people have fundamentally distinct values and lifestyles that are misunderstood and disrespected by people in urban areas.⁴

Thus, rather than attempt to drive towards a single, narrow definition of “rural” and “small-town,” we will embrace multiple lenses to help capture the legitimate complexity and nuance that faces those seeking to engage people strategically outside of major metropolitan areas.

Political, Economic, and Community Context

Though some 2016 shifts are attributable to short-term political dynamics and individual candidates, there is no question that a growing separation between urban and rural areas has been developing for quite some time, with state-level political trends showing a strong lean to the right outside of major metropolitan areas. And while rural and small-town America is not monolithic and should not be viewed as such, there has been a steady shift in most such areas over the past five presidential elections (with only the 2008 election as an outlier).⁵

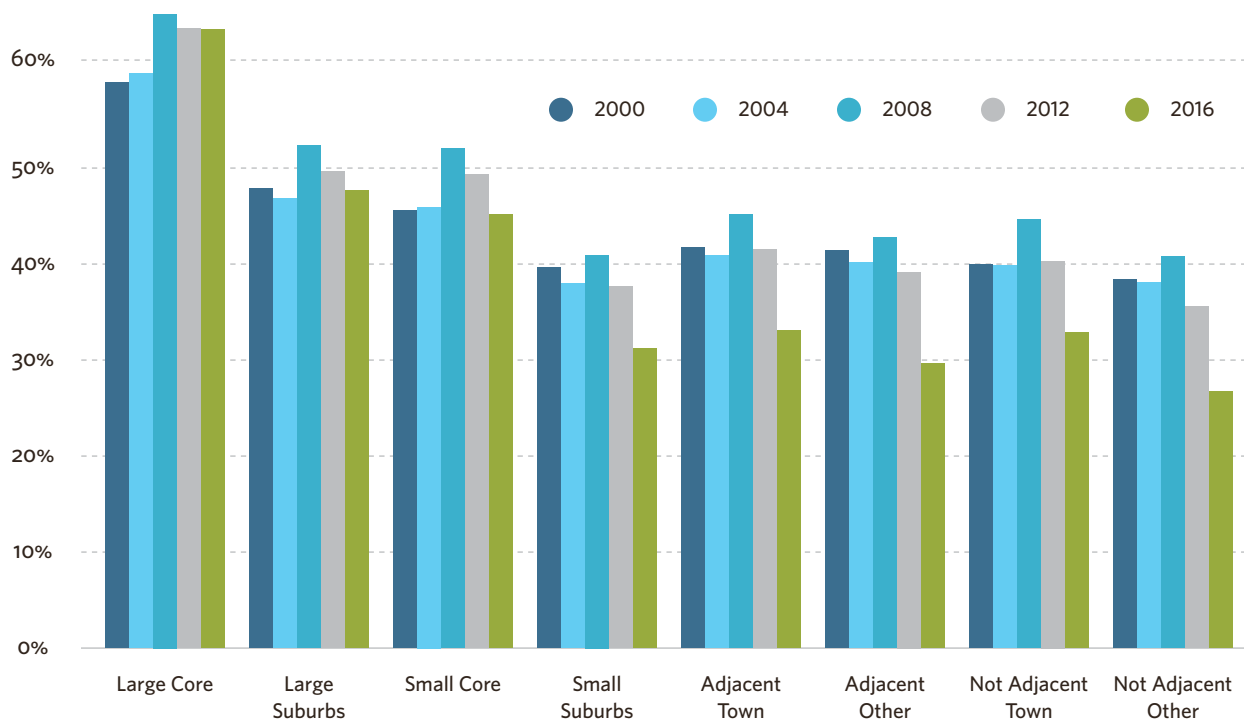


Figure 1: Percent of Vote for Democratic Presidential Candidate Along the Rural-Urban Continuum, 2000 to 2016

Source: Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, Dave Leip, 1/31/2017

⁴ Cramer, Katherine J. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016. Print. <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo22879533.html>

⁵ <http://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1308&context=carsey>

These shifts are laid bare in visual representations of extreme geographic partisan sorting and the increasing number of places where elections are simply not competitive.

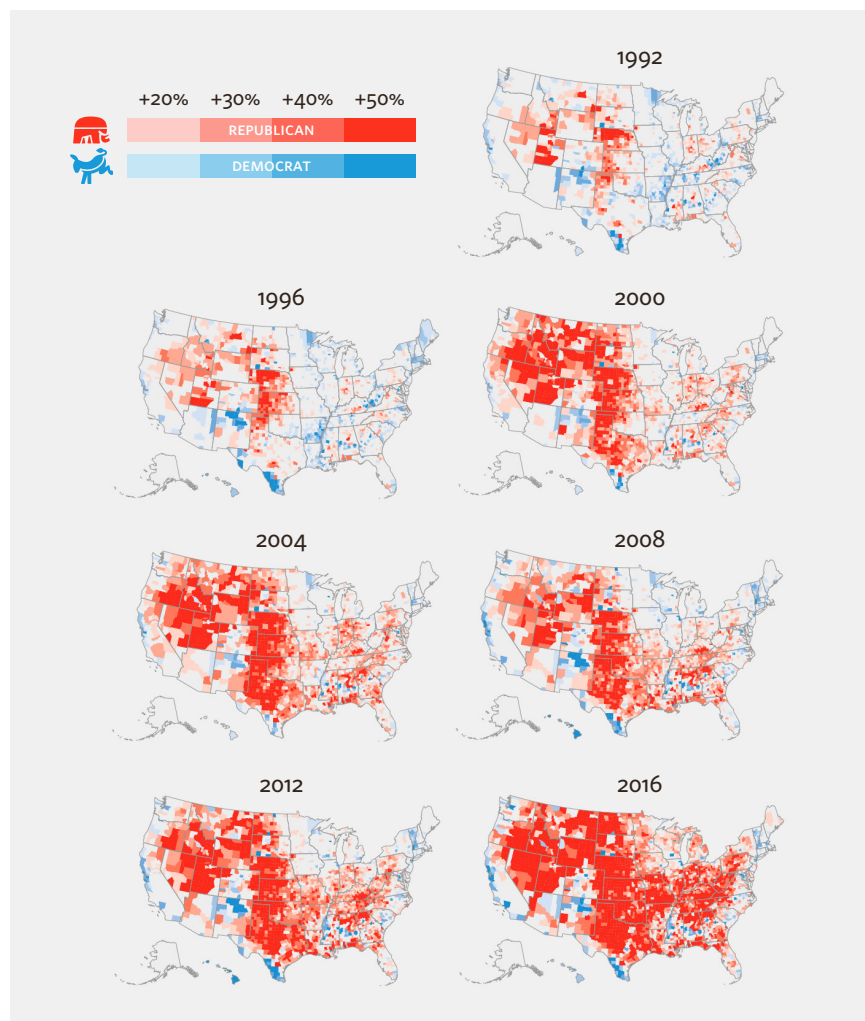


Figure 2: *Counties Where Presidential Candidates Won the Two-party Popular Vote by More than 20 Percentage Points*
Source: *FiveThirtyEight, Cook Political Report*

While the strategic imperatives for bridging the urban-rural divide in politics and public life are laid bare by the devastating public policy outcomes at all levels of government in recent years, it is critical that we lift up the moral and economic imperatives as well.

It is an understatement to say that since 1980 many rural areas and small-towns have been increasingly hard hit by economic globalization and automation, which devastated manufacturing sectors and middle-class union jobs; the eclipse of the family farm in the face of big agriculture and corporate monopolies; the collapse of local retail economies; the boom and bust nature of commodity and extraction-centered economies; and a set of public health issues, including the opioid epidemic and “deaths of despair” related to drugs, alcohol, and suicide. Limited broadband access and

movement of younger people away from rural areas have also contributed to economic and community challenges. Compounding these issues is a depleted public sector (infrastructure, education, criminal justice, health, etc.), starved of resources by rigid ideological agendas at every level of government that don't serve community needs.

It is important to note that rural and small-town communities are far from monolithic, with economic foundations varying significantly at a regional level:

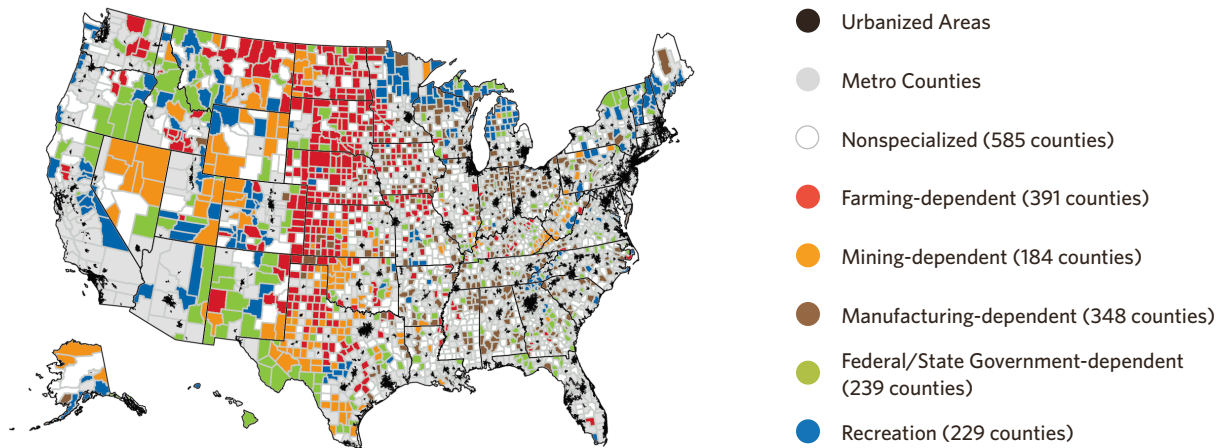


Figure 3: 2015 County Typologies (using data from 2010 to 2012)

Source: USDA Economic Research Service using data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis

Population growth trends in rural communities also vary regionally and in relation to main economic drivers:

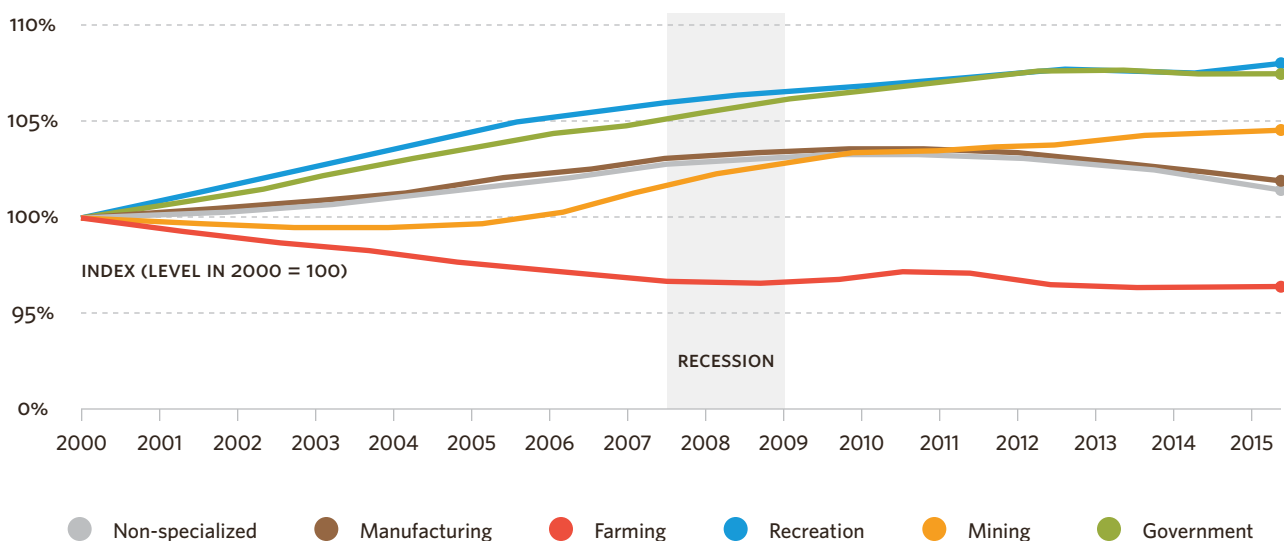
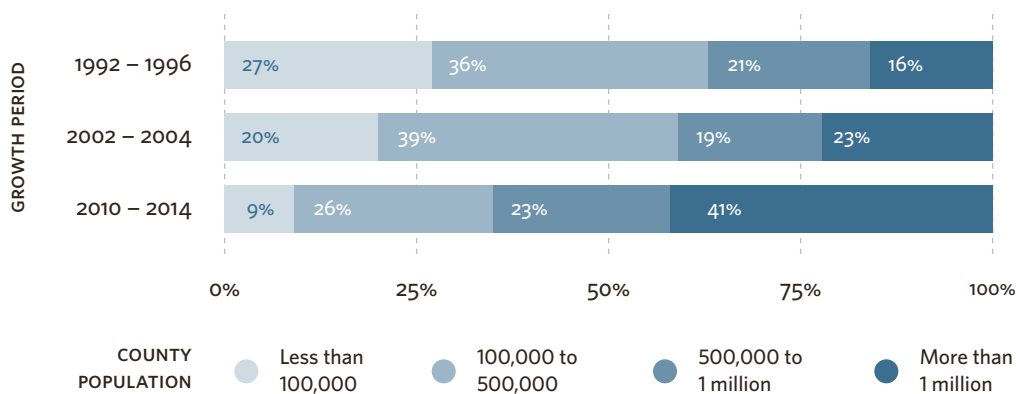


Figure 4: Rural Recreation County Population, 2000 to 2015 (values for all years reflect counties in 2015 ERS County Typology codes)

Source: USDA Economic Research Service based on county population estimates from U.S. Census Bureau

That said, two stark trends underlying economic anxiety and outlook that cut across most regional differences are the dramatic shift in where new jobs are being created, and the very uneven economic recovery between urban and rural areas since 2008:



Note: Because of rounding, not all figures add up to 100 percent

Figure 5: Share of U.S. Job Creation by Size of County in Three Periods of Economic Growth

Source: Economic Innovation Group, by The New York Times

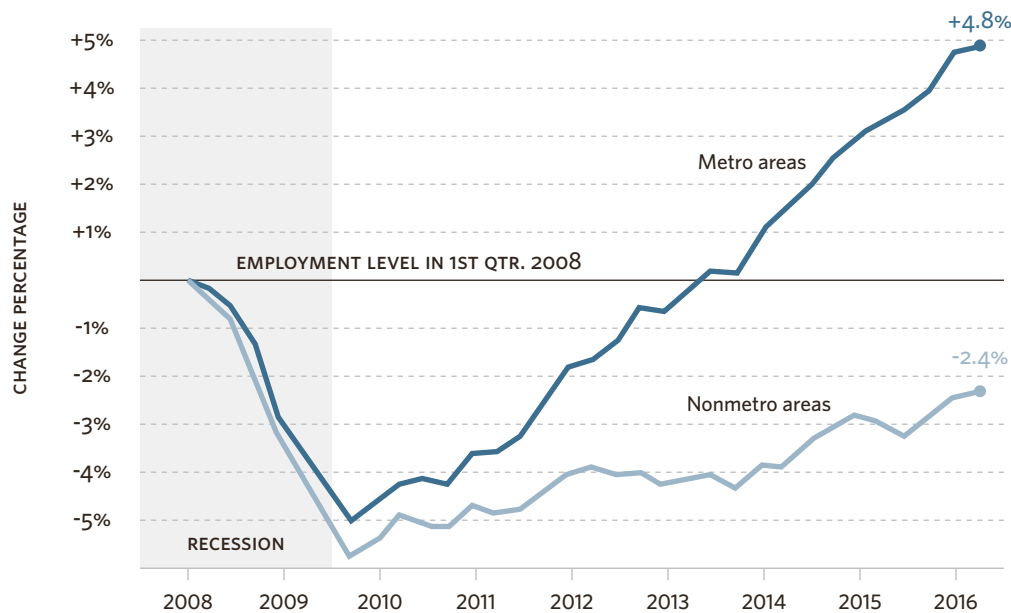


Figure 6: Change in Employment Since the Start of the Great Recession

Source: USDA Economic Research Service, Chart by Bill Marsh, The New York Times

Though some communities have bucked these trends through recreation-based economic development, innovative farming, or renewable energy enterprises, **it is no exaggeration to say that the economic realities and outlook for many rural and small-town communities are dire.** One of the imperatives for any meaningful civic engagement work will be imagining credible scenarios for a different economic future that allows people to live with dignity in the communities they call home.

Funding and Civic Engagement Context

At the same time rural areas have experienced these growing challenges, foundations and nonprofit civil society base-building groups have steadily withdrawn, including the shuttering of the National Rural Funders Collaborative (NRFC) and multiple major rural philanthropic initiatives over the past decade.⁶ Despite its demise, the NRFC's mission statement could hardly seem more relevant today: "seeking to build a movement of support and advocacy for alternative rural economies based on community assets of culture, land and human capital and grounded in relationships and values of equity and justice."

Recent studies have estimated that .5% of foundation grants have the word "rural" in the description and only about 6-7% of all grant dollars go to rural areas, despite representing 19% of the U.S. population.⁷ While there is some increased interest in this area and a few bright spots with regional and local funders, there is no discernible, significant vision or investment strategy with the specific intent of community-building or increasing civic engagement capacity in rural and small city America.⁸

The reasons underlying this lack of interest and investment are not hard to understand, but must be addressed if we are to chart a different path forward. Structural bias towards cities (where most foundations are based and a critical mass of their people come from), basic geographic and relational separation, perceived lack of organizational capacity and related infrastructure that can be leveraged to maximize impact of investments, and general misconceptions and biases about rural people and places are all contributing factors. That said, a number of funders, especially in thematic areas like economic development, public health, environment, just transition/post-fossil fuel energy futures, as well as a number of place-based and community funders, have made progress in authentically engaging and investing outside of major metropolitan areas.

Though there are notable exceptions, it is also fair to say that organizational infrastructure intended to build power and agency for rural and small-town Americans to improve their lives and communities is generally far from the necessary scale and depth. The highest impact organizations are often engaged

⁶ <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/2014/12/04/what-ails-rural-communities-philanthropy-what-must-be-done/>

⁷ <http://www.dailyyonder.com/rural-gets-less-foundation-money/2015/06/29/7893/>

⁸ The late journalist, Rick Cohen, covered rural philanthropy extensively for *Nonprofit Quarterly*. Please see Appendix B for references to a number of his pieces on the subject.

in work around conservation, family farming in opposition to corporate agriculture, anti-extraction, and the “Just Transition” movement away from fossil fuels. Among these organizations are many effective base-building, organizing, and campaigning entities, though few have reached a scale sufficient to drive statewide policy agendas or are able to deeply weave together electoral engagement with their other organizing and issue advocacy. There are precious few examples with dedicated, long-term general support let alone short-term investments for civic and voter engagement initiatives. It is not difficult to draw a direct line between philanthropy’s withdrawal from rural and small-town areas to a fragility in organizational and civic engagement capacity.

One particularly damaging consequence of the lack of investment and civil society infrastructure is that right-wing and religious talk radio, churches, and civic associations supported by the American Legislative Exchange Council, the Chamber of Commerce, and other national forces have sent anti-government, anti-pluralist, xenophobic, and socially divisive rhetoric across rural America virtually unchallenged for over two decades. In addition to economic and community trends, this concerted effort has been a key driver of the significant sense of differences in **culture and identity** that people in rural and small city America feel toward those in urban areas.

Political Scientist Katherine Cramer, in a deep study of rural and small-town communities in Wisconsin, has defined this confluence of trends as resulting in a heightened “politics of resentment.” This “politics of resentment” arises from the way social identities, the emotion of resentment, and economic insecurity interact, leading people to understand their circumstances as the fault of a guilty or less deserving social group rather than a result of broad social, economic, or political forces. Such scapegoating is a powerful force when combined with an engineered “rural consciousness”—the belief that rural areas are ignored by decision-makers, that rural areas do not get their fair share of resources, and that rural people have fundamentally distinct values and lifestyles that are misunderstood and disrespected by people in urban areas. It also should be noted that **these dynamics are profoundly racialized**, stoked by right-wing forces looking to direct people’s attention and frustration away from the legitimate causes of their dislocation.⁹ For this reason, any serious effort to bridge the urban-rural divide will need to be thoughtfully explicit about race.

It must also be said that any discussion of a rural “politics of resentment” must include an honest assessment of how liberal elitism, paternalism, and arrogance have contributed to it. While exaggerated and exploited by right-wing media and politicians, these dynamics are far from figments of the rural imagination. Progressives must understand that their reductionist caricatures of rural people as uneducated, backward, and racist is deeply felt on the receiving end and is a nontrivial factor in hardening of resentment. Thus, progressives must be willing to own the work we ourselves need to do to forge relationships and a deeper sense of understanding and respect, not simply blame or try to “fix” the other.

⁹ Cramer, Katherine J. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016. Print. <http://www.press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/P/bo22879533.html>

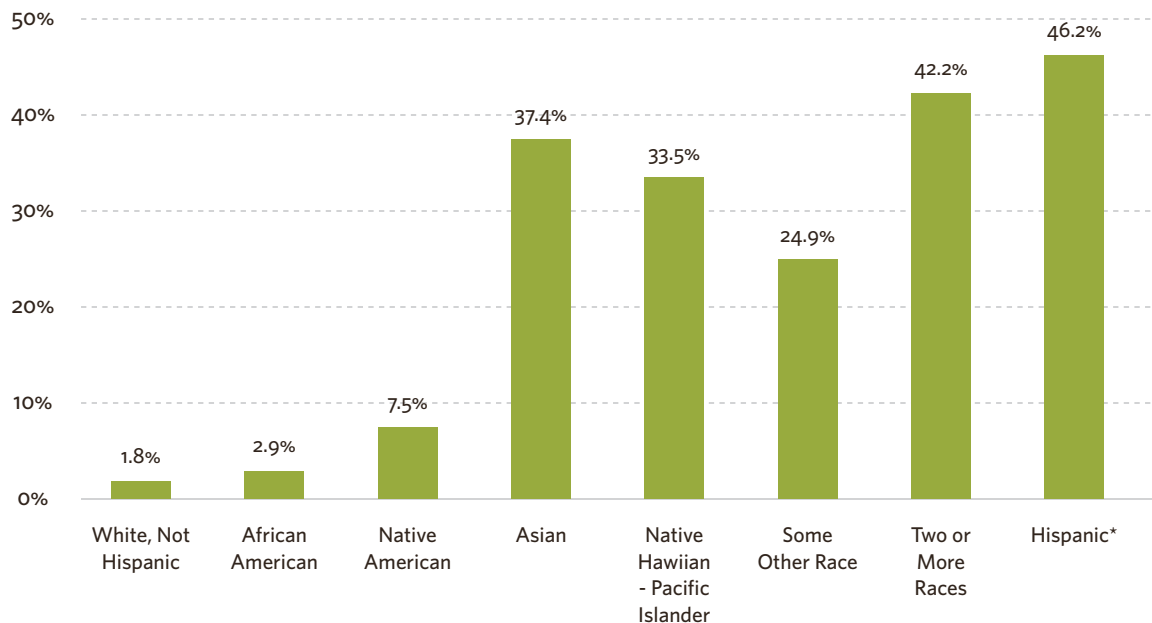
While the obvious manifestation of all of these trends has been escalating partisan polarization, understanding and addressing issues of culture, identity, and worldview are the real challenges before us. In short: there are genuine moral imperatives to build power in rural areas and small-towns for those who believe in a just and equitable society, AND there is no legitimate path to statewide governing power in many places without creating a sense of connection and mutual interdependence between urban and rural communities. Thus, we must not fall into an either/or trap, but rather find the both/and opportunities to bridge our current divide.

Framework and Principles for Rural Civic Engagement

Before proposing a set of opportunities as a potential path forward, it's important to lift up and reiterate the key contextual realities that we face in this work, including:

- › **Deep partisan polarization limits opportunities for meaningful engagement around standard state and federal elections.** We must find creative pathways into this work that don't begin and end with elections, which will ultimately, and unhelpfully, be distilled down to a simple partisan choice.
- › **Partisan polarization is really an expression of something much deeper and harder to address with short-term, siloed civic engagement efforts: culture, identity, and worldview.** We must pursue deeper, sustained work on multiple fronts if we are to have any chance of having impact at this level, especially as it relates to white racial identity and racism.
- › **Lack of investment, not talent or ideas, has been the major challenge for rural and small town civic engagement capacity.** While greater scale and new approaches are needed for sure, the reality is that there is a significant reservoir of remarkable people and creative approaches that could be unleashed in rural communities with meaningful financial support.
- › **Right-wing forces, both for-profit and religious, have near total domination of the media and communications landscape.** These communications and persuasion outlets form a key underpinning of divides around culture, identity, and partisan political expressions. We must both confront these and deploy alternate engagement channels to contest what's in the air and water.
- › **Perception that rural and small-town America is exclusively white masks critical opportunities and needs.** Deeper engagement of segments of white communities in rural areas is essential for state-level power in many places. That said, rural and small-town America is only 14% less diverse than the country as a whole. We will miss opportunities for engaging African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian-Pacific Americans as well as deeply needed multiracial organizing if we accept the premise of a purely white rural America. In the 10 U.S. counties with the lowest per capita income as of the 2010 census, all of which are located in rural areas, whites constitute more than 61% of the

population in only three and were the minority in four of these counties.¹⁰ Moreover, people of color and Native Americans accounted for 75% of population growth in rural and small town America between 2000-2010.¹¹ Specific rates of population growth can be seen here:



* Hispanics may be of any race

Figure 7: Rural and Small-Town Population Change by Race and Ethnicity, 2010

Source: Housing Assistance Council Rural Research Brief, April 2012

- › **Traditional organizing and campaigning methodologies are critical but insufficient in areas with lower population density.** While deep relational work and some level of strategic centralization are essential, organizing models that are overly dependent on heavy brick and mortar infrastructure (including paid staff-centric models) have often proven to be unsustainable outside of major metropolitan areas - even in reasonably sized regional centers. Experimenting with complementary methodologies will be especially important in these areas.
- › **Top-down, one-size fits all issue frames, messages, and narratives fall flat in rural.** What we say and how we say it can't be cooked up on the coasts and dropped into rural areas from above. If we're serious about impacting culture and identity, we need to listen to people who are of the communities we're talking about. While homogenous, nationalized campaigns are efficient, that's almost certainly the wrong path.

¹⁰ Dixon, Patrick. "Rural America is More Diverse Than You Think." The Week, May, 2017.
<http://theweek.com/articles/692098/rural-america-more-diverse-than-think>

¹¹ Housing Assistance Council. "Race and Ethnicity in Rural America." 2012.
http://www.ruralhome.org/storage/research_notes/rn-race-and-ethnicity-web.pdf

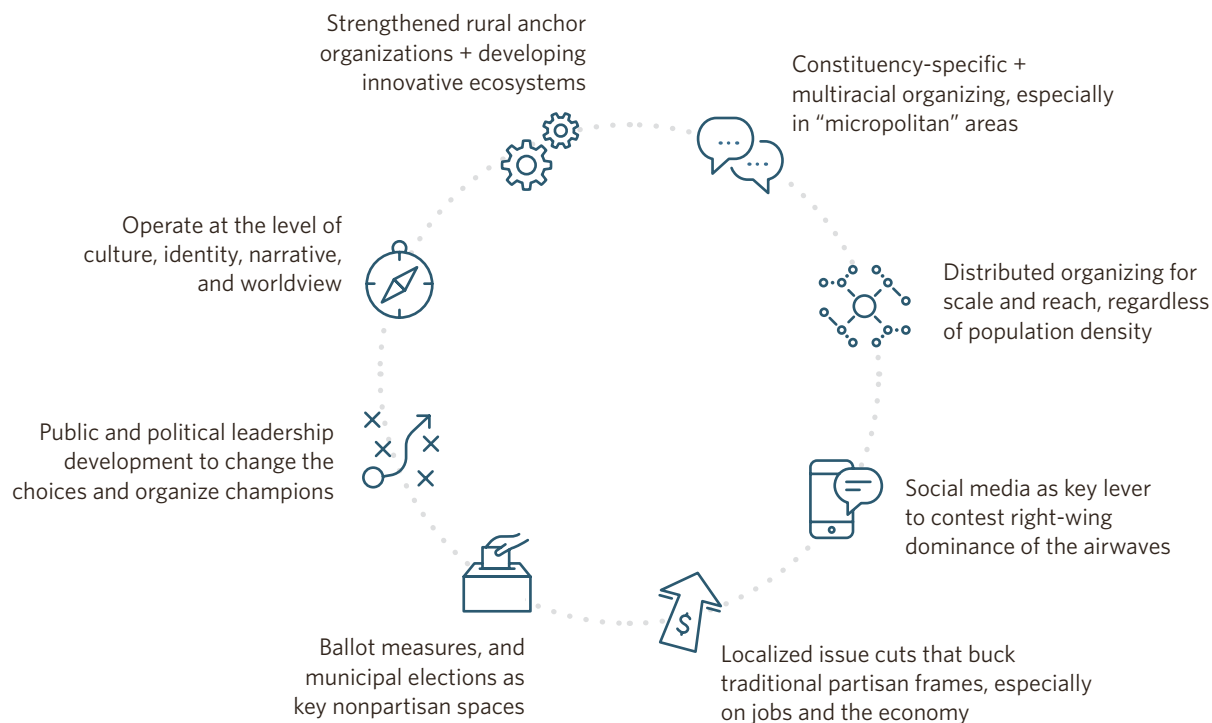
- › **Organizations and ecosystems for collaborative rural civic engagement will take time to develop.** While the situation we face is dire and urgent, we didn't get here overnight and we can't expect trust, expertise, and capacity to be developed overnight. Additionally, the path forward will require engaging new and nontraditional civic engagement actors.

Additionally, here are a few principles that should guide our thinking about strategic investments, though not necessarily unique to the rural and small-town context:

- › **Focus on the states as the arena where this work can be most impactful.** The path to impact remains daunting in most states, but is more within reach (at least in the short and mid-term) than the federal level. Starting investments in a select set of states with a focused strategy (potentially in regional cluster(s) for cultural continuity and ease of sharing resources) would likely be the wisest course for impact and learning.
- › **Make rural and small-town civic engagement a key part of statewide power-building strategies, not a siloed piece of work.** As state level organizing and electoral strategies become more coherent and better resourced, we have an opportunity to ensure rural and small-town efforts are a fully integrated part of the whole. In particular, consider the outsized role that "micropolitan" areas often play in state legislative politics.
- › **Invest in effective civic and voter engagement initiatives in the short- and mid-term that change what's possible in the long-term by:**
 - Directly contributing to longer-term advocacy and organizing initiatives rather than simply being mobilization exercises;
 - Building sustainable capacity and infrastructure (leaders, money, ideas, relationships, data, etc.) rather than surrendering to cyclical ups and downs;
 - Challenging dominant worldview and narratives rather than reinforcing them.
- › **Being race silent or avoidant is not strategic when organizing in white communities, rural or otherwise.** Racial identity is a central force driving political polarization, exploited relentlessly by right-wing leaders and organizations. While the path to being explicit about race can be challenging when organizing white people, we will never achieve the deep belief in mutual interdependence we need to achieve state-level power if we avoid it. It would be a mistake to fall into the false economic vs. racial equity dichotomy in this work. Moreover, if progressives don't talk about race, it doesn't mean that race won't be talked about—they just won't be part of the conversation.
- › **Be authentic, relational, and humble with existing rural and small-town civic engagement actors.** While there may be increased or new attention being focused on rural in this moment, those working in rural communities have seen funders come and go before. Just because funding interest has waned in recent years doesn't mean people aren't doing great work or lack big ideas for the future. We should listen deeply and take leadership from those working on the frontlines.

Emerging Strategic Investment Opportunities

Within this broader context and framework for investment—as well as the obvious caveat that rural areas are not monolithic and thus approaches must be adapted to fit the local environment—the following intersecting strategies (many of which need to be developed in tandem in a given place) come into focus:



While much could be written about each of these emerging areas of opportunity, here is some background to provide texture and basic contours for consideration:



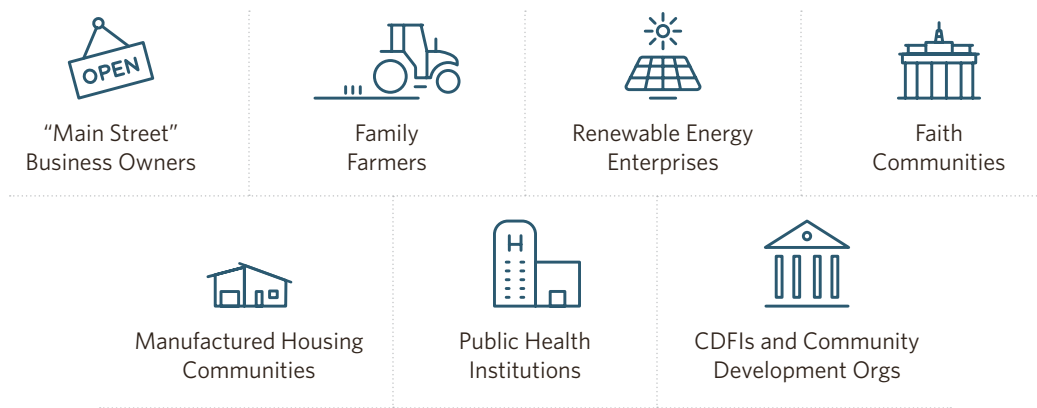
- **Start with existing anchor organizations that have strong foundations and are deeply rooted in rural and small-town communities.** It's a mistake to think that there are no dynamic organizations doing effective base-building, leadership development, advocacy, and electoral work outside of major metropolitan areas. This may go without saying for some, but we should be supporting efforts to scale up where there is a strong foundation, in some cases helping organizations truly become a center of gravity—not building something new or temporary.

Organizations like Land Stewardship Project in Minnesota, Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Missouri Rural Crisis Center, Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, Southern Echo, Western Organization of Resource Councils, Arkansas Policy Panel, Rural Organizing

Project in Oregon, and many others have done impactful work for decades. Nobody understands local culture and identity better. National organizing networks like People's Action and PICO have also increased their attention and focus on supporting organizations in rural areas and small-towns and could be partners in this next phase. The expertise and partnership of strong rural organizations is an important starting point.



Support the development of expanded civic engagement ecosystems, including important actors such as:



1. **"Main Street" Business Owners.** While globalization, automation, and the ascendancy of large brick and mortar chains and online retail have deeply and adversely affected many local economies, small businesses are still pillars of small-town and rural life. Small business owners are often important community leaders and have deep connections with their customers and the broader community. They often serve on local boards and commissions that work to promote their communities and its institutions. Many also have well-developed marketing and communications practices that could be leveraged in a civic engagement context. Organizations like Main Street Alliance and Small Business Majority could be effective partners in innovating around how small business owners engage culturally and around elections.
2. **Family Farmers.** Family farmers have a deep understanding of corporate control of the economy because of their relationship to big agriculture. Aside from being the cultural taproot of rural identity and pride, they also have a built-in reason to think deeply about interdependence with urban areas because of access to markets. Developing a policy framework for agriculture that lessens market volatility and increases opportunities for self-reliance (rather than further corporate consolidation) would be a major contribution towards a better economic future in rural areas. This is also a particularly dynamic space in rural areas, with a growing number of people attracted or returning to this sector with interest in sustainability and agroecology. In addition to a number of important and effective state-based organizations that organize family farmers, the Farmers Union, both

nationally and specific state chapters, could be a key ally in this work. This work should be scaled up and integrated with broader civic engagement efforts.

3. **The Renewable Energy Sector.** Another important subset of the broader business community, renewable energy businesses are often one of the bright spots in rural and small-town economic development. There is an opportunity to engage these businesses in civic engagement work, helping tell a different story about the role of government as well as an economic future that isn't fossil-fuel and extraction industry dependent. There are also emerging models for community ownership in the renewable space, including initiatives by Native American tribes.
4. **Faith Communities.** Still a critical part of small-town and rural culture and civic life, faith communities are key actors in civic engagement work. The Right has effectively organized a major segment of this powerful civil society domain, but there remain manifold opportunities to engage congregations and faith leaders everywhere. Among other critical values, faith communities are an important space for challenging dominant narratives and shaping the meaning people make of the world. Networks like PICO and Faith in Public Life have been innovating in this space for years and could have a focused impact in small-towns and rural areas.
5. **Manufactured Home Communities.** As with family farmers, residents of manufactured home communities have a particularly acute experience with corporate control of the economy because of the consolidation and terrible practices of the industry. Manufactured Housing Action, a relatively new organization, could be an important partner here.
6. **Community and Economic Development Institutions.** While often not considered "civic engagement organizations," Community Development Financial Institutions and other community and economic development organizations have an obvious and critical role to play in the economic future of rural and small-town communities. They have deep understanding of their communities, have complex webs of relationships, and offer a different story on the role of government in peoples' everyday lives. Organizations like Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) and Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet) as well as the South Carolina Association for Community Economic Development (SCACED) could be instructive in the role of these institutions in public life.
7. **Public Health Institutions.** Though somewhat restricted because of their dependence on public resources, public health institutions often have deep roots and big footprints as employers in rural and small-town communities. As was in evidence during recent debates on the Affordable Care Act, rural and small-town hospitals were key actors. Bringing these stakeholders into an aligned ecosystem, even if not as fully as some other actors, could have major benefits.



- **Embrace opportunities to engage rural and small-town African American, Latino, and Native American communities.** While much attention has been paid to white rural and small-town voters since the 2016 election—and there are unquestionably critical needs for engagement here—precious little has been said about the rural Native American communities and communities of color who have been largely neglected by the progressive civic engagement universe for years.

Despite historic underinvestment, recent elections in Virginia and Alabama have clearly demonstrated the significance of African American civic engagement, both in major metropolitan areas as well as in small-towns and rural areas. Similar opportunities for meaningful work exist in states like North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. In addition to a number of emerging initiatives in the South and Southeast, groups with deep roots organizing in African American communities such as Southern Echo and One Voice have been and could be key leaders in this work.

There are significant opportunities for increased Native American voice in states like Arizona, New Mexico, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Montana, the Dakotas, Oregon, Nevada, Washington, and Alaska. And there is great work to learn from and build on from groups like Western Native Voice and the Wisconsin League of Conservation Voter's Native Vote project.

Similarly, there are significant Latino and other immigrant communities based in farm country and meatpacking towns all over the country. Asian-Pacific Americans also have deep roots in rural parts of the Midwest and South in farming and fishing communities. The bottom line is that while making progress with a subset of white voters in rural areas is essential, so is building capacity and power in rural Native American communities and communities of color.

- **Invest in authentic multiracial organizing, especially in “micropolitan” areas.** In addition to constituency-specific organizing and engagement, we should maximize opportunities for genuine multi-racial organizing to foster authentic and lasting relationships and feelings of common cause, especially in regional population centers that have become more diverse, as well as the areas around them. In particular, engaging people in these areas surrounding towns that have become more diverse could combat the “halo effect” that has been widely documented in Europe. In these areas, people live close enough to see communities changing and feel threatened, but not close enough to have regular, positive interpersonal interactions that might dispel their fears. There is no question that the “politics of resentment” has been intentionally racialized and thus we must make progress in breaking down these barriers over time if we are to have any chance of building genuine statewide power.



Leverage advances in the practices of distributed organizing and technological innovation for large-scale, leaderful civic engagement—wherever people are. Geography used to be determinative in limiting who we could engage in organizing work. If you lived outside of a mid-sized town, traditional organizing models often made engagement at scale somewhere between difficult and impossible. In recent years, however, there have been major advances in the practices of distributed organizing—engaging motivated volunteers online; offering tools, training, technical support to those volunteer leaders; and giving those leaders meaningful space to work together in their own communities towards a coordinated strategy or goal.

This approach can obviously work anywhere, but is tailor-made for rural and small-town communities where it's inefficient or impossible to have paid staff and brick and mortar infrastructure. When done well, this approach offers a chance at significantly greater scale and the development of human capacity. Organizations moving in this direction or complementing other organizing approaches this way are likely to be the best vehicles for rural civic engagement at scale. Among others, Becky Bond and Zack Exley, drivers of the Sanders campaign's distributed organizing initiative, are working with a number of movement organizations through their "Big Organizing Project" and could be key partners in building this capacity. And new initiatives like the Wisconsin Leadership Development Project (WiLD) are already experimenting with training models to support small-scale distributed organizing.



Focus on strategic communications, especially leveraging social media, to contest the space where people are increasingly getting their news and making meaning of the world. While directly combating right-wing and evangelical dominance on traditional radio and television will be challenging, the shift towards social media for information means we have other avenues to communicate and persuade. This is not to say that rural and small-town radio and newspapers are unimportant—they absolutely are and should be better leveraged than they are today. But in terms of efficiency and path to scale, we should invest seriously in the creation and dissemination of high quality, culturally relevant content (with rural and small-town community leaders and organizations as creators), delivered in an organized and sustained way by sources trusted by community residents and their social networks.

The content, tone, and style of this outreach will need to be substantially different than what progressive organizations typically use to mobilize their existing base. Rather, these frames and messages need to engage and persuade people who are not already with us—both culturally and ideologically. The Center for Rural Strategies is currently attempting to launch a significant initiative on the content creation front, and there are a number of potential organizations and networks that could leverage their constituencies to act as content disseminators.

Imagine a network of tens of thousands of rural and small-town Americans pushing out and amplifying great, culturally relevant content that challenges dominant rightwing narratives to their existing networks on a daily basis. Coming from a trusted source—friend, family, neighbor, coworker, etc.—this would be much more powerful and have greater reach than a “spoke and wheel” communication platform with an organization at the center simply communicating to its own base. Though it would pay dividends for electoral engagement, this functionality should exist in rural and small-town America permanently, year-in and year-out. And while it is true that rural communities skew a bit higher in reliance on traditional media sources for news and information, it is a mistake based on a false stereotype to think that social media is not a significant (and growing) way that rural citizens acquire and dispense information.¹²



● **Embrace organizing and issue analyses that buck traditional partisan frames, especially those centered on a better economic future.** Some of the most impactful work that’s being done in rural and small-town communities has come from focusing on organizing campaigns that connect deeply to local culture and shared values and thus escape the partisan stalemate. For example, a group of aligned conservation groups in Alaska have taken on and beaten a right-wing Governor and state legislature by focusing on salmon as the concern that unites multiple constituencies (Native Alaskans, commercial fishermen, green groups) and cuts across partisan divides. They are now moving toward a statewide ballot initiative to protect fisheries and fish habitat. Similarly, organizing in the Midwest around community control and love of home vs. big corporate agriculture has gained momentum against huge odds. The “Just Transitions” movement that’s focused on an economic future not dependent on fossil fuel and extraction is another example of this.

While these campaigns are about winning important victories in the short-term, they also offer opportunities for larger narratives, and for shifting people’s view of the world because of how deeply they’re felt. While it may be less efficient than launching a nationalized “rural issue” campaign frame from some generalized perspective, it should be obvious that deep resonance will come from rooting organizing and communications in specific places: in Appalachia, the rural South, the Great Lakes states, the Intermountain West, the Great Plains, or in Indian Country. Each has its own ethos and cultural compass. Strategic funders should incentivize this kind of thinking, particularly around credible opportunities for better economic futures.

¹² Miller, Carolyn, Lee Rainie, Kristen Purcell, Amy Mitchell and Tom Rosenstiel. “How People Get Local News and Information in Different Communities.” Pew Research Center, 2012.
<http://www.pewinternet.org/2012/09/26/how-people-get-local-news-and-information-in-different-communities/>



- **Use ballot measures and municipal elections as direct democracy opportunities to engage people around elections that aren't trapped in Right/Left partisan political frames.** With partisan polarization preempting meaningful interactions around many state and federal elections, ballot measures and municipal elections (most of which are nonpartisan) are two fertile arenas that offer compelling opportunities.

Ballot measures let us take the parties and personalities out of elections and get right to a conversation about right, wrong, and who's to blame for the challenges people face in their daily lives. The Ballot Initiative Strategy Center could be a key partner in surfacing opportunities and a rural or small-town approach. Voter engagement in this arena could be a way to build relationships and have deeper conversations than high profile partisan elections.

Municipal and county-level elections, while still coming down to a choice about candidates on election day, are generally nonpartisan and often framed around local issues that aren't as politically polarized. While they receive much less attention than up-ballot elections, municipal elected officials have a massive role to play in people's everyday lives (especially with state-level gridlock rivaling that in DC) and a significant platform from which to help shape how people think and feel about public life. Municipal elected officials are also among the most likely to seek higher office and thus are a key part of a future bench. Similar to ballot measures, these elections offer opportunities for deeper conversation than is possible in a partisan political context.



- **Support public leadership pathways to change the choices, have impact on governing outcomes, and increase the number of aligned public voices that can shape public debates.** Among many deficits in rural civic engagement today is the lack of a focused way to encourage and support community leaders to consider elected and appointed office. While there are emerging public leadership initiatives in many states, they have a long way to go, especially in rural and non-major metropolitan areas. The stakes are real as a key component of a sustainable civic engagement ecosystem is a critical mass of public leaders who can drive positive outcomes for communities and use their position to define the terms of debate.

While we need to build "outside" capacity, there must also be a complementary, high-functioning "inside." And while much of the work in this space must be done by non-c3 actors, there are abundant opportunities for leadership development and networking of elected officials that any entity can engage in. At a minimum, we should be actively networking municipal and state legislative leaders from rural areas who share progressive values. National organizations like Wellstone Action, Local Progress, and Working Families Organization as well as state-based initiatives could be powerful partners in this work.



- **Operate at the level of culture, identity, narrative, and worldview.** There is a well-known adage in organizational development work that “culture eats strategy for breakfast”. The same could be said about culture and politics. Indeed, progress in any of the tactical areas of opportunity described in this paper is likely dependent on the ability to effectively operate at this level where so much of individual identity and understanding of the world at-large is shaped.

Thus, rather than assuming we have the depth of understanding and the tools we need in a traditional civic engagement tool-belt, we must integrate social science and cognitive linguistics, pop culture, strategic communications, technology and art. We must increase our capacity to use culture, stories and language to engage people more deeply and begin to reach new common ground in hearts and minds—especially as it relates to race and immigration. There is no other way to ultimately get to what’s underneath the wall of partisan polarization and create new conceptions of urban-rural interdependence.

The good news is that frontline groups in many states are already advancing work at this level. Supporting short-term experiments and generating meaningful learning in this space should be considered an urgent priority as well as critically important for long-term impact.

Criteria for State and Regional Screening

Though there is no right or wrong way to choose initial priorities for investments in the work described above, a thoughtful framework may be helpful for prioritization. Among other factors, it may make sense to focus on states or regions where:

1. **Urban-rural mutual interdependence is fundamental to progressive policy outcomes** at a state level—no legitimate path to power with an either/or approach;
2. **The urban-rural divide is particularly pronounced** (strong identity of an urban “them” in rural and regional population centers, and of rural “them” in the state’s major metro areas);
3. **There is history and some level of cultural identity with rural/small city progressivism**, agrarian populism, etc.;
4. **There have been pronounced political and policy shifts to the right** in rural and small towns over the past decade;
5. **Rural and small-town communities are diverse** and/or experience “halo effect” of being in relatively close proximity to diverse communities but lacking depth of relationships;
6. **Existing civic engagement capacities are in place:**
 - a. State donor tables that could drive investment matches (even if somewhat nascent)

- b.** Voter engagement and alignment tables with statewide constituencies (even if unorganized/under-engaged)
 - c.** Rural organizing infrastructure (even if underdeveloped or non-electoralized)
- 7. Regional clustering of multiple strategic state opportunities is possible**—where cultural identity and dominant economies may be similar and it's efficient to share learnings and technical capacities.

It also merits explicitly stating here that using a narrow federal electoral “swing state” lens is likely unhelpful for these purposes. There are many states where deeper rural and small-town engagement could dramatically impact state-level policy and politics regardless of whether it is a Presidential swing state or has a competitive U.S. Senate election.



Conclusions and Next Steps

So, what are we waiting for? Virtually every domestic social and policy goal pursued by funders requires movement by decision-makers at the municipal, state, and federal levels. Consequently, these objectives could be increasingly out of reach without reversing the growing cultural and partisan divides between urban, suburban, and rural communities. The above landscape and reflection on how donors might understand and appreciate rural Americans and their diverse cultures is meant to spur new and coordinated conversation, strategy, and investments. Philanthropy and its civil society partners can connect rural and urban Americans around core democratic and humanistic values far more effectively than can partisan political or business actors.

But we must act in concert. Where and with whom can we pilot some early work that, if successful, could be replicated elsewhere? What states or regions offer early opportunities for success?

Using the criteria suggested above, we might think about those states in which recent rightward leans seem aberrational relative to their long-standing social and political ethos. These are the places where cultural and ideological questions are more fluid and could be influenced. For example, the Upper Midwest/Mid-Atlantic region—especially Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Missouri, Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania—might present rich opportunities to experiment with new work. Each has some level of farm/labor/social-Gospel history of progressive cultural and political commitments. Indeed, most of our current notions of what it means to be progressive stems from these farmers and factory workers a century ago. Other states and regions like the rural Southeast, Appalachia, or Inter-Mountain West offer their own compelling opportunities.

The important priority, from our perspective, is that donors and their grantees think and act together as much as possible. Our vision and ambition is high—we are seeking to build infrastructure and connections in places and with people many of us and our institutions don't know very well, and who certainly don't know us—yet the realization of a more just, fair, and prosperous country will be informed by how well we conceive of and enact this bridge between rural and urban Americans.

We welcome your feedback on this emergent exploration and look forward to discussing opportunities for strategic collaboration in this critical work.

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Appendix A: Links to Organizations in the Field

There are too many organizations doing good work in the field to list them all, but here is a select list, including those named in the scan:

State and Regional Organizations

Appalachian Center for Economic Networks
www.acenetworks.org

Arkansas Public Policy Panel
www.arpanel.org

Heartland Center for Leadership Development
<http://heartlandcenter.info/>

Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement
www.iowacci.org

Kansas Values Institute
www.kansasvaluesinstitute.org

Kentuckians for the Commonwealth
www.kftc.org

Land Stewardship Project
www.landstewardshipproject.org

Missouri Rural Crisis Center
www.morural.org

Mountain Association for Community
Economic Development
www.maced.org

One Voice
<http://onevoicems.org/>

Rural Organizing Project
www.rop.org

South Carolina Association of Community
Development Corporations
www.scaced.org

Southern Echo
www.southernecho.org

The Alaska Center and Alaska Engagement
Partnership
www.akcenter.org

Western Native Voice
www.westernnativevoice.org

Western Organization of Resource Councils
www.worc.org

Wisconsin Leadership Development Project
www.wildproj.org

Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters
Native Vote Project
www.conservationvotersinstitute.org

National Organizations and Networks

Ballot Initiative Strategy Center
www.ballot.org

Center for Rural Strategies
<https://www.ruralstrategies.org/>

Family Farm Action
www.farmaction.us

Institute for Agriculture & Trade Policy
www.iatp.org

Institute for Local Self-Reliance
www.ilsr.org

Local Progress
www.localprogress.org

Main Street Alliance
www.mainstreetalliance.org

National Organizations and Networks (*cont.*)

Manufactured Housing Action

www.mhaction.org

National Farmers Union

<https://nfu.org/>

National Rural Assembly

<http://ruralassembly.org/>

Native Organizers Alliance

<http://www.nativeorganizing.org/>

Organization for Competitive Markets

<http://competitivemarkets.com/>

People's Action

www.peoplesaction.org

PICO National Network

<https://www.piconetwork.org/>

Rural Sociological Society

www.ruralsociology.org

Small Business Majority

www.smallbusinessmajority.org

The Daily Yonder

www.dailyyonder.com

Wellstone Action

www.wellstone.org

Working Families Organization

www.workingfamilies.org

Appendix B: Rural-Urban Continuum Map

The following map was developed by Dante J. Scala and Kenneth M. Johnson from the University of New Hampshire's Carsey School of Public Policy, based on analysis of the USDA's Economic Research Service data in order to visualize the rural-urban continuum.

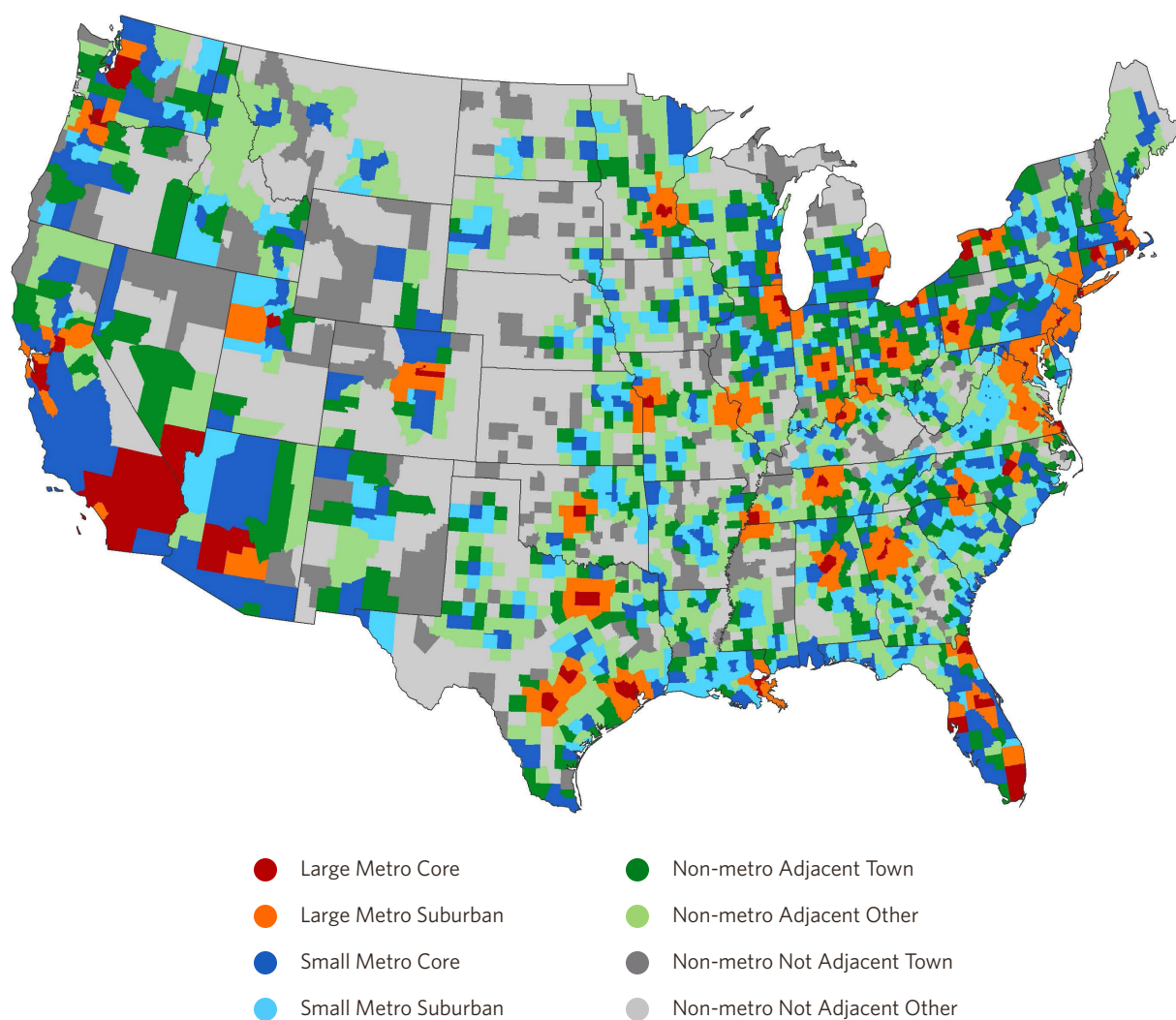


Figure 8: Rural-Urban Continuum Map, Analysis of USDA ERS Typologies

Source: University of New Hampshire's School of Public Policy, by Dante J. Scala and Kenneth M. Johnson

Appendix C: Rural and Small-Town Population by Race and Ethnicity, By State, 2010

State	% White, Not Hispanic	% African-American	% Native American*	% Asian	% Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	% Other Race	% Two or More Races	% Hispanic**
AL	71.4	21.9	0.7	0.5	0.0	0.1	1.2	4.3
AK	63.9	1.3	20.9	3.4	0.4	0.1	5.9	4.1
AZ	57.5	1.9	14.1	1.0	0.2	0.1	1.6	23.5
AR	78.9	13.9	0.6	0.6	0.0	0.0	1.4	4.5
CA	54.4	2.6	1.5	2.5	0.2	0.2	2.2	36.4
CO	76.7	1.0	1.2	0.8	0.1	0.1	1.3	18.9
CT	84.6	2.5	0.2	2.3	0.0	0.1	1.6	8.6
DE	74.1	13.8	0.5	1.0	0.0	0.2	1.7	8.8
FL	69.5	12.9	0.5	0.9	0.0	0.1	1.3	14.7
GA	66.3	25.8	0.2	0.8	0.0	0.1	1.2	5.7
HI	31.1	0.5	0.3	24.9	10.9	0.1	21.5	10.5
ID	83.0	0.4	1.7	0.9	0.1	0.1	1.5	12.4
IL	90.8	3.6	0.2	0.6	0.0	0.1	1.1	3.6
IN	93.3	1.3	0.2	0.5	0.0	0.1	1.0	3.6
IA	92.8	1.0	0.3	0.7	0.0	0.0	0.9	4.3
KS	83.3	2.8	0.8	1.1	0.1	0.1	2.0	9.9
KY	92.2	3.9	0.2	0.4	0.0	0.1	1.2	2.0
LA	63.2	31.0	1.0	0.7	0.0	0.1	1.3	2.7
ME	95.5	0.5	0.8	0.7	0.0	0.1	1.3	1.1

* Native Americans include American Indians and Alaska Natives

** Hispanics may be of any race

Source: Housing Assistance Council Analysis of the 2010 Census of Population and Housing

State	% White, Not Hispanic	% African-American	% Native American*	% Asian	% Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	% Other Race	% Two or More Races	% Hispanic**
MD	78.4	14.7	0.2	1.3	0.0	0.1	1.8	3.4
MA	87.5	2.6	0.3	2.8	0.0	0.5	2.0	4.3
MI	91.2	2.1	1.4	0.6	0.0	0.0	1.6	3.0
MN	91.1	1.0	2.0	0.8	0.0	0.0	1.3	3.7
MS	56.7	39.2	0.6	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.8	2.2
MO	91.4	3.1	0.5	0.6	0.1	0.0	1.5	2.8
MT	87.7	0.2	7.0	0.5	0.0	0.0	2.0	2.5
NE	87.8	0.6	1.2	0.5	0.0	0.1	0.9	8.9
NV	74.3	2.0	3.3	1.9	0.2	0.1	2.1	16.1
NH	94.9	0.6	0.3	1.4	0.0	0.1	1.3	1.4
NJ	59.4	18.2	0.6	1.5	0.1	0.1	2.2	18.0
NM	38.6	1.5	15.0	0.7	0.0	0.2	1.3	42.7
NY	89.6	3.1	0.6	0.9	0.0	0.1	1.4	4.2
NC	67.7	20.4	2.6	0.7	0.0	0.1	1.3	7.1
ND	87.9	0.7	7.3	0.5	0.0	0.0	1.4	2.0
OH	93.3	2.2	0.2	0.6	0.0	0.1	1.4	2.2
OK	71.4	3.5	12.2	0.7	0.1	0.1	5.5	6.6
OR	83.8	0.4	2.0	0.9	0.2	0.1	2.5	10.1
PA	92.3	2.9	0.1	0.7	0.0	0.1	1.0	2.9
RI	91.6	0.9	0.6	2.4	0.0	0.1	1.6	2.9
SC	56.5	36.4	0.4	0.7	0.0	0.1	1.1	4.7
SD	84.0	0.5	11.1	0.7	0.0	0.0	1.5	2.1
TN	88.1	6.7	0.3	0.5	0.0	0.1	1.3	3.0
TX	58.4	7.7	0.4	0.6	0.1	0.1	1.0	31.8

* Native Americans include American Indians and Alaska Natives

** Hispanics may be of any race

State	% White, Not Hispanic	% African-American	% Native American*	% Asian	% Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	% Other Race	% Two or More Races	% Hispanic**
UT	85.9	.04	2.9	0.7	0.2	0.1	1.3	8.5
VT	95.3	0.6	0.4	0.8	0.0	0.1	1.5	1.4
VA	78.0	17.1	0.2	0.5	0.0	0.1	1.3	2.7
WA	75.3	0.9	2.6	1.6	0.2	0.1	2.5	16.9
WV	94.4	2.8	0.2	0.4	0.0	0.0	1.1	1.0
WI	93.0	0.7	1.4	0.8	0.0	0.0	1.0	3.1
WY	86.7	0.4	2.6	0.7	0.1	0.1	1.3	8.2
Rural and Small-Town	77.8%	8.2%	1.9%	1.0%	0.1%	0.1%	1.6%	9.3%

* Native Americans include American Indians and Alaska Natives

** Hispanics may be of any race

Appendix D: External Resources

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Appendix E: Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the following people for participating in interviews, meetings and/or providing resources that helped inform the project:

FRED ACKERMAN-MUNSON

444S Foundation

EVAN BACALAO

Open Society Foundations

KATRINA BADGER

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

CAITLIN BAGGOT

North Star Civic Foundation

AMANDA BALLANTYNE

Main Street Alliance

ALLISON BARLOW

Wallace Global Fund

BECKY BOND

Big Organizing Project

KEVIN BORDEN

Manufactured Housing Action

RYAN CANNEY

Wellspring Advisors

DAN CANTOR

Working Families Organization

DENISE CARDINAL

Win Minnesota

DEE DAVIS

Center for Rural Strategies

XAVIER DE SOUZA BRIGGS

Ford Foundation

MYLES DUFFY

Faith in Public Life

ANTHONY FLACCAVENTO

Rural Scale

ETHAN FREY

Ford Foundation

STEPHEN GASTEYER

Michigan State University

GEORGE GOEHL

People's Action

ELIZABETH GUERNSEY

Open Society Foundations

LINDA HONOLD

Brico Fund

LEROY JOHNSON

Southern Echo

WHITNEY KIMBALL-COE

Center for Rural Strategies

ADAM KRUGGEL

People's Action

BARB LEACH

MIKE LUX

Mike Lux Media

GERI MANNION

Carnegie Corporation of New York

JUSTIN MAXSON

Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

CASSANDRA MCKEE

Wellspring Advisors

SARAH MILLER

Family Farm Action

SCOTT NIELSEN

Arabella Advisors

GIHAN PERERA

Ford Foundation

ILONA PRUCHA

Wellspring Advisors

LAURA QUINN

Catalist

MATT RAFFERTY

Alaska Engagement Project

MARK SCHULTZ

Land Stewardship Project

ADRIANNE SHROPSHIRE**FRANK SMITH**

State Infrastructure Fund

ANNE SUMMERS

Brico Fund

PAT SWEENEY

Western Organization of Resource Councils
& Western Native Voice

MATT TRUJILLO

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

LISA VERSACI

State Infrastructure Fund

GLADYS WASHINGTON

Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

ROBB WEBB

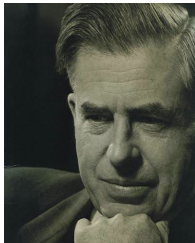
The Duke Endowment

DALE WIEHOFF**CAREN WILCOX****MELLOR WILLIE**

Navajo Housing Authority

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