

Community Strength and Economic Challenge Civic Attitudes and Community Involvement in Rural America

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In any given year, close to one in three Americans volunteer with a local organization and get involved in various activities that benefit their community. Community leaders and policy makers are interested in levels of community engagement because there is a presumption that a community's civic health can translate into community wealth as a result of local residents working together to improve their community's economic sustainability and quality of life. Although rural Americans are slightly more likely than urban and suburban residents to participate in community activities, not all rural communities demonstrate a similarly high level of community trust and engagement.¹

Community Variation in Civic Involvement

Most notably, *chronically poor* communities have lower levels of community trust and involvement than is the case for rural Americans living in economic decline, amenity/decline, and amenity-rich communities. Specifically, residents in chronically poor communities are less likely than other rural Americans to say that people in the community trust and get along with one another, that people in the community would work together to fix a community problem, and that people are willing to help their neighbors (see Figure 1). Further, these rural Americans are generally less involved themselves in local community organizations and committees than is true of residents in other types of rural communities. One exception to this pattern is that residents in chronically poor communities are almost as likely as residents in amenity/decline communities to belong to a local business group or Chamber of Commerce (see Figure 2). Overall, there is little variation among chronically poor communities in the percentages of residents who participate in local organizations.² In understanding the comparatively lower rates of community involvement across chronically poor communities, it is important to note that there may be fewer community

Key Findings

- Large majorities of rural Americans across different types of communities have very positive views of their neighbors and communities.
- Residents in chronically poor communities have lower levels of neighborly cooperativeness, community trust, and community participation than other rural Americans.
- There is little variation in levels of community participation across chronically poor communities.
- Residents in amenity-rich rural communities experiencing population growth demonstrate high levels of community trust and participation.
- Residents in economic decline communities demonstrate high levels of community trust and exceptionally high levels of community participation.
- There is considerable local variation in residents' civic participation across amenity/decline communities.
- Across all types of rural communities, college-educated residents are more likely than their non-college-educated neighbors to participate in local community organizations.
- Residents in amenity/decline communities are far more likely than other rural Americans to express a negative view of the effectiveness of local government.
- In decline and amenity/decline communities, the perception of community problems does not increase the likelihood of residents' participation in local community organizations.

Community and Environment in Rural America

This issue brief uses data from the Community and Environment in Rural America (CERA) Survey conducted by the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire to highlight the variation in the patterns of civic involvement across diverse rural communities. Between 2007 and 2010, the Carsey Institute conducted telephone surveys with almost 19,000 rural residents in geographically and socio-economically diverse rural counties across the nation in an effort to assess the similarities and differences in rural Americans' attitudes toward community change and development. To date, the CERA survey has been administered in thirteen different rural regions encompassing thirty six counties and twelve states (see Table 1).³

TABLE 1: CERA SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY COMMUNITY TYPE

Chronically Poor: Choctaw, Clarke, Wilcox, and Marengo Counties in Alabama (N = 1,108); Harlan and Letcher Counties in Kentucky (N = 1,000); Coahoma, Quitman, and Tunica Counties in Mississippi (N = 1,000)

Economic Decline: Jewell, Republic, Osborne, and Smith Counties in Kansas (N = 1,008)

Amenity/Decline: Coos County in New Hampshire (N = 1,732); Essex County in Vermont (N = 329); Hancock, Oxford, and Washington Counties in Maine (N = 3,029); Alger, Chipewa, Luce, Mackinac, and Schoolcraft Counties in Michigan (N = 1,008); Clatsop County in Oregon (N = 721); Pacific County in Washington (N = 279); Ketchikan Gateway Borough and Prince of Wales-Hyder Census Area in Alaska (N = 509)

Amenity-Rich: Chaffee and Park Counties in Colorado (N = 1,006)

FIGURE 1. RURAL CIVIC ATTITUDES BY COMMUNITY TYPE

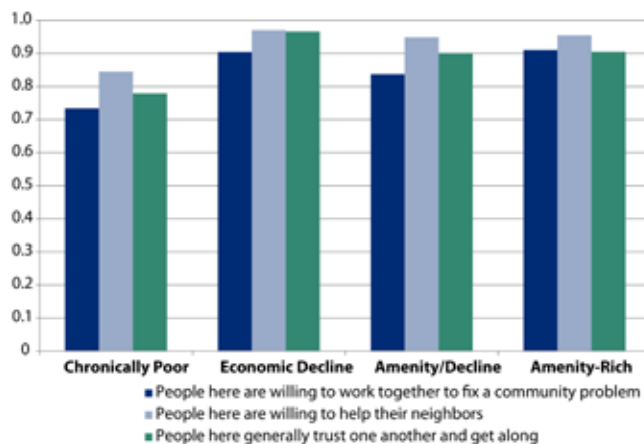
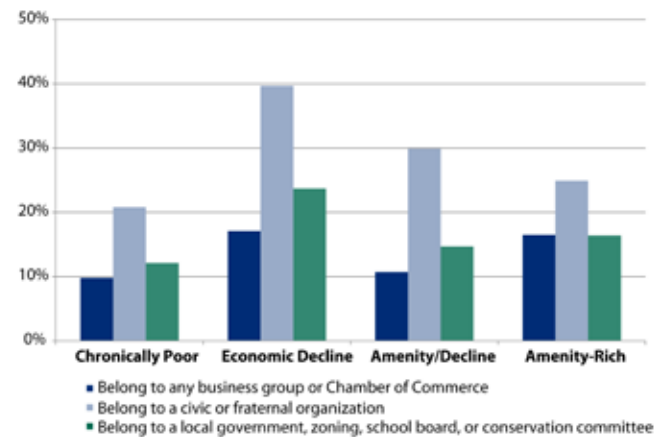


FIGURE 2. RURAL CIVIC INVOLVEMENT BY COMMUNITY TYPE



organizations and committees and fewer opportunities for civic participation in chronically poor than in economically better-off communities. This, clearly, would have a dampening effect on residents' ability to join local organizations or to work together with other community members to solve local problems.

At the opposite end of the economic spectrum, residents in *amenity-rich* rural communities are very positive about their neighbors and community. Almost all say that their neighbors willingly help one another, and nine in ten say that people in the community trust one another and would work together if faced with a local problem (see Figure 1). Befitting their positive view of community, they are also more likely than those in chronically poor communities to participate in a local civic or fraternal organization, the Chamber of Commerce or some other business organization, or a local government committee (see Figure 2). Therefore, although many amenity-rich communities are currently experiencing population growth due to the influx of retiring baby-boomers,⁴ this trend does not seem to have a negative effect on neighborly relations and commitment to community.

Much of rural America is neither chronically poor nor amenity-rich. Rather, many rural communities are experiencing a protracted period of *economic decline* due to the widespread loss of agricultural, timber, mining, and resource-related manufacturing jobs that has occurred in the United States in recent decades, an economic decline that is accompanied by steep population losses.⁵ Other communities that have experienced economic losses are faring somewhat better, largely due to plentiful natural amenities that have positioned them to forge a transition from resource-based manufacturing to amenity/tourism development; hence the CERA survey refers to these as *amenity/decline* communities.

Although the contrast in civic patterns between chronically poor and amenity-rich communities suggests a straightforward correspondence between a community's economic resources and its levels of civic engagement, this pattern is

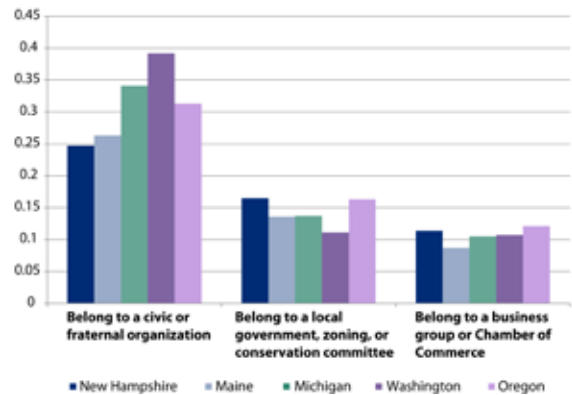
complicated by the evidence from our decline and amenity/decline communities. Residents in economic decline communities have levels of neighborly cooperativeness and community trust that are not only higher than those in chronically poor communities, but higher too than those found in amenity/decline communities. For example, 97 percent of decline residents compared to 90 percent of amenity/decline residents say that people in their community trust and get along with one another. Similarly, while 90 percent of decline residents say that people in their community could be counted on to work together if faced with a local community problem, 83 percent of amenity/decline residents express this view (see Figure 1). It is noteworthy, in fact, that the highly positive civic attitudes of decline residents are more approximate overall to residents in amenity-rich communities (see Figure 1). Decline residents also show a significant edge in participation in community organizations. Most strikingly, they are more likely than residents in all other types of communities to participate in a civic or fraternal organization, and are also significantly more likely than their rural peers to belong to a local government, school board, or other local committee (see Figure 2).

Unlike chronically poor communities where we see little inter-community variation in civic participation, there is considerable local variation in patterns of civic participation across amenity/decline communities. Although they confront relatively similar economic challenges and opportunities, residents from amenity/decline communities in Washington and Michigan, for example, are more likely than other amenity/decline residents to report belonging to a civic or fraternal organization, and residents from amenity/decline communities in New Hampshire and Oregon are more likely than other amenity/decline Americans to belong to a local government committee (see Figure 3). There may also, of course, be variation in patterns of civic engagement across economic decline and amenity-rich communities; we cannot explore this in the current CERA survey, however, because the representation of economic decline and amenity-rich communities is restricted, respectively, to one geographical region/state.⁶

Impact of Education on Civic Engagement

The patterns of civic engagement in rural America underscore the differential effect of education. As is true in urban and suburban communities nationwide,⁷ the rural residents who are most likely to join local organizations and groups tend to be college educated. Thus, looking at our sample of rural residents as a whole, whereas over a third (36 percent) of college graduates report belonging to a local fraternal or other civic organization, this is true of less than a quarter (23 percent) of residents with a high-school education. Similarly, whereas close to 25 percent of rural residents with a college education participate in local government committees, just over 10 percent of their non-college neighbors do so. Fewer residents, overall, belong to the Chamber of Commerce or

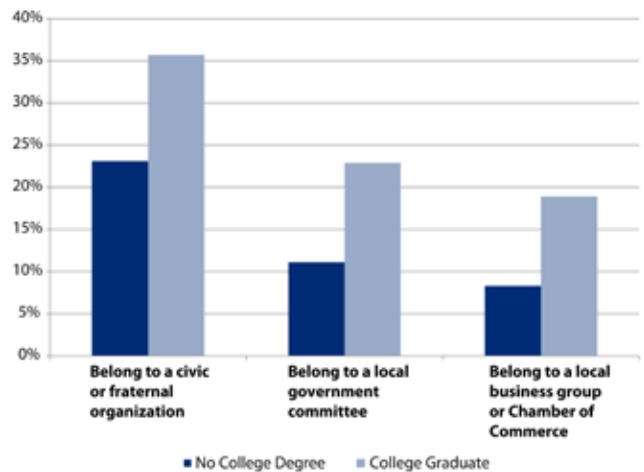
FIGURE 3. RURAL CIVIC INVOLVEMENT AMONG AMENITY/DECLINE COMMUNITIES*



*Alaska and Vermont residents were not asked about their involvement in specific types of organizations.

other business organizations, but here, too, college educated residents are more significantly represented, by as much as a two-to-one ratio (see Figure 4). This general pattern of the impact of education on civic participation is replicated within all four of our community categories: chronically poor, decline, amenity/decline, and amenity-rich.

FIGURE 4. ORGANIZATIONAL INVOLVEMENT BY COLLEGE EDUCATION STATUS



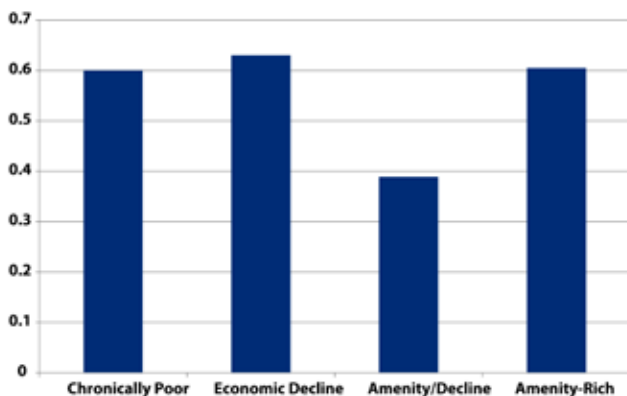
The positive relation between education and community participation further highlights the fact that chronically poor communities experience a significant civic disadvantage as a result of their poverty. Residents in chronically poor communities (26 percent) are less likely than residents in amenity-rich (48 percent), amenity/decline (36 percent), and decline (33 percent) communities to have a college education. Thus, given that education is associated with community participation, the lower level of education in chronically poor communities would, in and of itself, lead us to expect

comparatively lower rates of community participation in chronically poor communities, even if the number of civic organizations and opportunities were to be similar across different types of communities. Moreover, while education does not generally differentiate rural Americans' views of neighborly cooperativeness and community trust, it does make a difference among residents in chronically poor communities. College-educated residents in chronically poor communities are more likely than their non-college educated neighbors to say that people in the community are willing to help their neighbors (91 percent versus 82 percent), and to agree that people in the community trust and get along with one another (86 percent versus 75 percent).

Views of Local Government and Community Problems

In recent decades, rural and metropolitan Americans alike have expressed increasingly negative views of local, state, and federal government. The CERA survey indicates that among rural Americans, residents of amenity/decline communities have the most pessimistic view of local government effectiveness. Fewer than 40 percent of amenity/decline residents say that their local government is able to deal effectively with problems, compared to over 60 percent of decline, and 60 percent of chronically poor and amenity-rich residents (see Figure 5). Community and economic development politics may be more contentious and emotionally charged in amenity/decline communities as they try to forge a shift in their economic base. Public policy controversies over the implementation of new amenity development proposals, for instance, and the generally unsettled context that characterizes transitioning communities may fuel or exacerbate residents' negative views of local government.

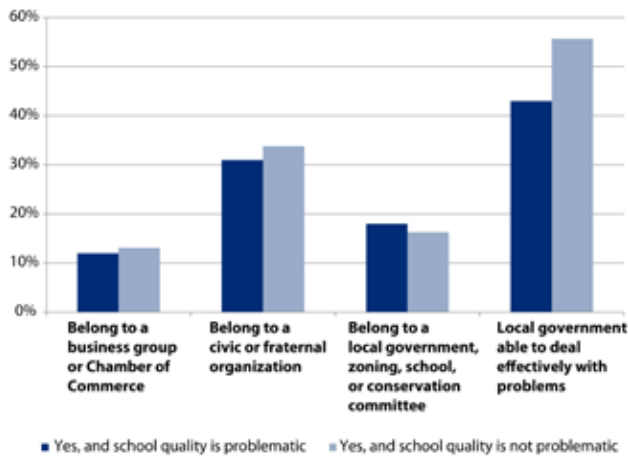
FIGURE 5. PERCENTAGE OF RURAL AMERICANS AGREEING THAT LOCAL GOVERNMENT CAN DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH PROBLEMS



College-educated rural residents in all except amenity-rich communities are more likely than their non-college educated neighbors to express a negative view of the effectiveness of local government. Again, the effect of education is especially pronounced among residents in chronically poor rural communities, where we see a sixteen percentage point difference between college graduates (53 percent) and non-college residents (69 percent) who say that their local government is able to deal effectively with problems. This gap of 16 percent is more than twice that found for views of government effectiveness between college-educated and non-college residents in amenity/decline (44 percent to 50 percent) and decline (58 percent to 65 percent) communities.

Participation in local organizations and committees is one concrete way in which residents can work to improve the quality of life in their community. The challenges posed to rural America by economic restructuring test the quality and capacity of local community institutions and their relevance in contributing to the community's future. The quality of schools, for example, can have a considerable impact on equipping young people with the job skills necessary to the development of new employment sectors (e.g., hospitality managers, biomass technicians). Yet, in decline and amenity/decline communities, where the losses resulting from economic restructuring are most acutely seen, there is no evidence that those who perceive particular problems with their schools are any more likely than others to get involved in trying to remedy the situation. Virtually similar proportions of those who believe that their local schools are not as good as they should be, and of those who believe that the schools are fine, participate on a school board or some other local government committee (18 percent and 16 percent, respectively), in the Chamber of Commerce (12 percent and 13 percent, respectively), and in a local civic or fraternal organization (31 percent and 34 percent, respectively) (see Figure 6). On the other hand, those who perceive a problem with the quality of the local schools are more likely than their neighbors to take a dim view of the effectiveness of local government (see Figure 6). It may not be a surprise that residents who perceive community problems are also more likely to express a negative view of the local government's effectiveness to deal with problems, though there may, of course, be some underlying factor that contributes to a dim view of both government effectiveness and the quality of schools. Nevertheless, if these residents were themselves to become more active in the local government of which they are critical, and in other community organizations, they might be able to steer changes that would increase the effectiveness of local government and mitigate the community problems at issue.

FIGURE 6. LOCAL GOVERNMENT EFFECTIVENESS AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION BY PERCEPTION OF LOCAL SCHOOL QUALITY



Conclusion

The survey data presented in this brief indicate that the pronounced economic disadvantage of chronically poor communities is accompanied by civic disadvantage. Compared to other rural Americans, fewer chronically poor residents offer a positive assessment of neighborly trust and cooperativeness and belong to local community organizations. Nevertheless, large majorities of residents across all types of rural communities are highly positive in their attitudes toward neighbors and their local community. This positive sentiment is an important civic resource as it can facilitate residents' readiness to work together to improve their community. Civic and business organizations and local government committees tend to attract more college-educated than non-college-educated residents. This is a significant civic divide in a democratic society that strongly emphasizes community belonging and participation. The divide, however, is not completely insurmountable; at least within relatively well-off local communities, one can imagine that energetic community leaders might be able to narrow the gap through proactive, targeted recruitment measures. The larger specter raised by the education-civic divide is that it exacerbates the civic disadvantage of chronically poor communities—communities whose residents are the rural Americans least likely to have a college education.

Notwithstanding the intertwining of economic and civic disadvantage in chronically poor communities, our findings indicate that the relation between a community's economic situation and its civic resources is far from straightforward. As we documented, economic decline residents show exceptionally high levels of civic commitment, and amenity/decline residents express the most negative assessment of the effectiveness of local government. Additionally, we

highlighted the variation in civic participation among the amenity/decline communities in our sample. These findings should remind policy-makers that in addition to significant regional economic divides within rural America, there are also significant intra-regional, local cultural differences that need to be factored in to any policy proposal that seeks to harness community residents in steering and supporting their community's well-being.

Social scientists and policy makers are interested in a community's civic resources, in part, because neighborly cooperativeness, community trust, and involvement in local community organizations are productive resources that a community can use to pursue initiatives that can help advance its economic development.⁸ Civic resources are not sufficient in and of themselves, however, to turn a community's trajectory of economic decline into one of growth. Clearly, the high levels of civic engagement among residents in economic decline communities in the CERA survey have not stemmed their communities' decline. Nonetheless, these rural Americans would be well-advised to harness their rich civic resources in pursuing new economic- and community-development initiatives. They could proactively use their high levels of neighborly trust and participation in community associations to work with government officials—in whom they, unlike many residents in amenity/decline communities, have confidence—as well as private investors in focused efforts to secure new employment opportunities for their region. Further, in attracting new employers they can leverage the added value that companies gain from locating in communities with a strong civic culture. Otherwise, a stark future looms for rural decline communities that are unable to transition out of their downward spiral, namely, resignation in the face of economic and population decline and, by extension, the lost viability of the very communities in which they are so deeply vested.

ENDNOTES

1. According to a national survey conducted by the Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Conference on Citizenship (*Civic Life in America: Key Findings on the Civic Health of the Nation*. Issue Brief. Washington, D.C., 2010), 28 percent of rural compared to 23 percent of non-rural residents volunteer; 9 percent of rural compared to 7 percent of non-rural residents work with neighbors to fix a community problem; and 62 percent of rural compared to 55 percent of non-rural residents exchange favors with neighbors.
2. Slightly fewer residents in chronically poor communities in Kentucky compared to those in Alabama or Mississippi belong to the Chamber of Commerce (6 percent, 12 percent, 11 percent, respectively), a civic or fraternal organization (19 percent, 22 percent, 22 percent), or to a local government committee, school board etc., (10 percent, 12 percent, 14 percent, respectively).
3. The CERA survey randomly selects households, and the structured telephone interview is conducted with the adult who has had the most recent birthday in the household. Following the probability weighting procedures used in survey analysis, the data are subsequently weighted to adjust for the number and age composition of people living in each household using county-level Census data.
4. See Kenneth Johnson, *Demographic Trends in Rural and Small Town America*. Carsey Institute, Reports on Rural America. University of New Hampshire: The Carsey Institute, 2006.
5. In the CERA sample, economic decline communities are represented by respondents from Jewell, Osborne, Republic, and Smith counties in Kansas, counties that have experienced a steep population loss of 16 percent since 2000. Much of this loss is due to out-migration (i.e., residents moving to other counties/regions), though natural decrease (i.e., more deaths than births) is a contributing factor; see Johnson (2006), pp. 15-16.
6. For example, our decline communities are located in Kansas, in counties in which mainline Protestantism, specifically Methodism, is the dominant religious affiliation. Mainline Protestantism is renowned for its emphasis on civic engagement, and thus may provide rural Kansans with strong civic resources notwithstanding the region's economic challenges. Other economic decline communities may not have such a strong civic culture. In the CERA survey, the Kansas counties are the only communities whose religious culture is predominantly mainline. Source: *U.S. Congregational Membership*, County Reports, 2000. Congregational membership data collected by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies, in association with the Glenmary Research Center.
7. The Corporation for National and Community Service and the National Conference on Citizenship, *Civic Life in America: Key Findings on the Civic Health of the Nation*, 2010.

8. For example, in amenity/decline Coos County, New Hampshire, community leaders have purposefully drawn on the county's civic resources to implement a collaborative, county-wide tourism rebranding project; see Michele Dillon, "Social Capital in Economic Action: The Rebranding of a Rural Community." Paper presented to the Eastern Sociological Society, 81st Annual Meeting, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2011.

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