

Introduction

When the dust settled following the bitterly contentious 2016 presidential campaign, analysts scrambled to make sense of the results. One of the clearest conclusions was that rural communities voted overwhelmingly for the Republican candidate. Hardly anyone credited the rural vote with having decided the election. But the differences between rural and urban or suburban results were striking. Exit polls showed that 62 percent of the rural vote went to Donald Trump, compared with 50 percent of the suburban vote and only 35 percent of the urban vote. Further evidence demonstrated that rural voters had increasingly become Republican in each of the two previous elections. Moreover, the smaller a county's population and the farther it was from a metropolitan area, the more likely it was to have voted for Trump.¹

The leading explanation for the growing rural-urban political divide was that rural people wanted change because they were suffering economically. A related explanation attributed the rural vote to its predominantly white population being racist and misogynist enough, particularly if resentment was involved, to prefer a white male candidate. Both explanations seemed correct on the surface. Rural areas were indeed

hurting economically and they were predominantly white. Grievances about lost jobs and slurs against African Americans, Mexicans, and women surfaced repeatedly at campaign rallies. A Pew poll taken four months before the election anticipated that these would be decisive factors: seven in ten white rural residents said jobs in their communities were hard to find and white men seemed particularly bleak about their families' futures and the threats posed by immigrant labor.² Figures released by the U.S. Census Bureau also underscored rural hardship: nonmetropolitan incomes in 2015 rose by only 3 percent, while metropolitan incomes grew by 6 percent.³

Pundits suggested that the grievance-and-resentment arguments probably had merit, yet did not get to the bottom of what might be going on in rural America. Writing in the *New York Times* a week after the election, Charles M. Blow argued that rural residents were undoubtedly “suspicious of big institutions and big government [that were] located in big cities with big populations of people who don’t look like them.” In truth, he observed, rural communities were racially and culturally isolated while cities were cosmopolitan and diverse. In short, the divide was cultural.⁴

Kentuckian Dee Davis of the Center for Rural Strategies thought, too, that Trump’s victory had more to do with culture than policy. “A lot of us in rural areas, our ears are tuned to intonation,” he said. “We think people are talking down to us. What ends up happening is that we don’t focus on the policy—we focus on the tones, the references, the culture.”⁵

It certainly seemed plausible that the rural-urban divide was cultural. For more than a century, *New York Times* editorials had vacillated between romanticized essays about the rustic life and caustic criticisms of backward voters in rural areas

who were intent on impeding urban progress. The argument fit Thomas Frank's conclusion in *What's the Matter with Kansas?* that residents in rural places like Kansas were influenced by conservative ideological beliefs to the point of voting against their own interests. The claim about a cultural divide may have also reminded readers of Barack Obama's ill-advised 2008 remark about small-town voters who "get bitter" and "cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them."⁶

But if the divide was cultural, was that all that needed to be said? Was it enough to suggest that rural voters were resentful because they were less cosmopolitan than people living in cities? Were rural Americans that one-dimensional? After all, some 30 million Americans live in small towns with populations of fewer than 25,000 residents. And if the "rural population" as defined in the census is tallied, the number rises to 44 or 50 million, depending on which figures are used.⁷ To find out what people in these communities think—what their lives are like, what they value, and how they arrive at their opinions about political candidates and government—wouldn't it make sense to spend time talking with them?

I've spent the past decade studying and writing about rural America. It's a world I grew up in but have not lived in for many years. It's the world of politically and religiously conservative people who live in small towns, on farms, and in sparsely populated areas far from either coast. They consider their communities the heartland of America. I've visited hundreds of these communities, studied their histories, and collected information about them from surveys, election results, exit polls, censuses, business statistics, and municipal records. My research assistants and I have conducted well

over a thousand in-depth qualitative interviews. We've talked to farmers, factory workers, business owners, homemakers, clergy, town managers, mayors, and community volunteers. We've listened to their stories about what they like and do not like about their communities, their struggles and accomplishments, the issues they care about, their political views, and their hopes and aspirations for their children. We've tried as best we could to set aside our disagreements with some of the things we heard, seeking instead to listen and to understand.⁸

My argument is that understanding rural America requires seeing the places in which its residents live as *moral communities*. I do not mean this in the vernacular sense of "moral" as good, right, virtuous, or principled. I mean it rather in the more specialized sense of a place to which and in which people feel an obligation to one another and to uphold the local ways of being that govern their expectations about ordinary life and support their feelings of being at home and doing the right things. This is the meaning of moral communities that we find in the writings of Émile Durkheim and in the work of many writers in his tradition.⁹

A moral community draws our attention to the fact that people interact with one another and form loyalties to one another and to the places in which their interaction takes place. These enduring interactions and the obligations and identities they entail constitute the community as a home. Understanding communities this way differs from the notion that people are independent individuals who form their opinions based strictly on their economic interests and their psychological needs. They *may be* rugged individualists. But they are not fundamentally that. Spend some time in rural America and you realize one thing: people there are community-oriented.

Contrary to the view that gained popularity during the 2016 presidential campaign, rural America is *not* a homogeneous census bloc. Nor is it a uniform polling category or even a one-party political constituency. To be sure, rural America is politically more conservative than urban America. But that fact has led to as much misunderstanding as it has up-close analysis. Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right*, for instance, is an insightful study of the resentment that led the people she studied in the Lake Charles Metropolitan Statistical Area in Louisiana, a population of more than 200,000, to support the Tea Party. But it is not a study of rural America.

Rural America is composed of small communities. Rural Americans live either in small towns or near them. Drive in nearly any direction from any city and these are the communities that dot the landscape. Of the 19,000 incorporated places in the United States, 18,000 of them have populations less than 25,000. And of these 18,000, 14,000 are located outside of an urbanized area. This is rural America.

Towns are the centerpiece of rural America. As colonists populated the Eastern Seaboard, they settled in towns. And as the population expanded along the open frontier, it established towns. Whether settlers lived in them or farmed in their vicinity, towns were essential to their survival, so essential in fact that even as the nation's population relocated to cities and suburbs, the town's place in rural America's imagination held firm.

Thorstein Veblen many years ago captured the towns' meaning in ways that still resonate with rural Americans: "The country town is one of the great American institutions; perhaps the greatest, in the sense that it has had and continues

to have a greater part than any other in shaping public sentiment and giving character to American culture.”¹⁰

Nearly a century later, few of those who live in cities and suburbs would think about it the way Veblen did. But many who live in country towns would. Rural Americans realize the nation and the culture have moved on. And yet they believe that the heart of America still beats in small communities.

Talking to rural Americans, you learn quickly how deeply their identity is rooted in their town. Its population may be declining, but they care about its survival. It is where they know people—their neighbors, the mayor, the woman at the bank, the man at the farmers’ co-op. Maybe they grew up here. Maybe they own land. They care if the home team has a winning football season. They take pride in their community spirit.

You may not like everything about your town—there may be a lot you don’t like. And yet the town is a big part of who you are. It is where you live, where you know people, and where people know you. Its values rest on your shoulders and its ways of thinking inflect your conversations. It is your way of life. You value it and you try to protect it.

The moral outrage of rural America is a mixture of fear and anger. The fear is that small-town ways of life are disappearing. The anger is that they are under siege. The outrage cannot be understood apart from the loyalties that rural Americans feel toward their communities. It stems from the fact that the social expectations, relationships, and obligations that constitute the moral communities they take for granted and in which they live are year by year being fundamentally fractured.

The fracturing is evident in the fact that many rural communities are declining in population. Schools are closing, businesses are leaving, and jobs are disappearing. It is evident

in families raising children who they know will live elsewhere and in parents commuting farther to work, shop, or worship.

These alone, however, are not the reason for thinking that moral outrage is rooted in the sense that moral communities are under siege. The farm population and the population of many small towns have been declining for a century. Rural families have not only anticipated its inevitability but also encouraged their children to seek better jobs elsewhere for generations. When a moral order begins to crumble, the implications run wider and deeper. Its slide diminishes trust while bolstering protective energies. Asking “How can the problems be solved?” leads to questions about who is to blame.

Understanding the cultural dynamics presently at work in rural communities requires starting with the local norms, expectations, and habits that persons living in these communities take for granted most of the time but can readily articulate when asked to say what their communities are like. Rural communities viewed through the lens of people who live there differ from one place to the next depending on population size, history, region, and the local economy. However, there are also commonalities, including what residents laud as the desirable aspects of their communities. It matters to them that they feel safe and can enjoy the relative simplicity of small-town life. They take pride in their communities’ achievements, if only something as locally significant as a new fire truck or a winning basketball team. They recognize the disadvantages of living where they do, and yet they weigh these disadvantages against the obligations they feel to their children, perhaps to aging parents, and to themselves.

Although rural communities are often surprisingly resilient, residents are keenly aware of the problems they face. The

population may have edged downward for so long and so slowly that they hardly noticed, but when the school closed, that was like a blow to the gut. The closure of the only small manufacturing plant in town when its parent company relocated to Mexico did too. And so did the discovery of a meth lab in town and an accident that killed a carload of teenagers. Residents talk about these problems as if they are new or worse than ever before, even though they may not be. They worry that expensive high-tech equipment is forcing local farmers to quit. They worry that more of the community is elderly or poor and harder to assist locally. And they worry that people from other countries who speak a different language are coming in and threatening the very makeup of their community.

Faced with daunting challenges such as these, rural communities' first line of response is the people they trust and look to for help when they need it. They expect fellow citizens to take responsibility for themselves as best they can, and when they can't, for community organizations to help. Their sense of moral obligation cuts both ways: don't be a burden if you can help it, and pitch in generously when you can be of help. While some of this assistance occurs neighbor-to-neighbor, much of it is formally organized. The organization in which assistance is mobilized is usually the church. After that, the volunteer fire company, the library committee, Masons, Meals on Wheels, and a surprising number of similar organizations are present. Persons with means are expected to play leadership roles, as are local elected officials. People are proud of these traditions but acknowledge that they are not always sufficient. Like everyone else, they expect government to help.

Rural communities' views of Washington usually emerge in two competing narratives: on the one hand, the government ignores us and doesn't do anything to help with our problems, and, on the other hand, the government constantly intrudes in our lives without understanding us and thus makes our problems worse. People say they are "unhappy," "displeased," "appalled," and "outraged." The difficulty, they say, is not only that Washington is broken. It's also that in order to fix problems, you have to know the local situation (the moral order). You have to deal with people by knowing their needs and their situations, not imposing a one-size-fits-all agenda, which they figure reflects the government's urban interests more than theirs. Meanwhile, people feel the federal government is more intrusive than ever, raising taxes and imposing regulations that seem incommensurable with how things should be done.

Besides that, the moral order in rural communities includes a pragmatic, commonsense approach to local issues, which Washington seems incapable of understanding. The local community prides itself on being practical, productive, and down-to-earth even if it sometimes fails and takes iterations to get right. But community leaders recognize that the rules for engaging community problems have changed. To get anything done requires outside support, and to get outside support, you have to network and write grants. That necessitates expertise they may not have. Or it puts local affairs at the mercy of partisan state and federal politics. The frustration is deepened by the sense that Washington is all talk and no action, wasteful and impersonal, a place inhabited by highfalutin ideas and smooth rhetoric but ignorant of the common person. Residents are angry that Washington seems run

by special interests that do nothing but cater to lobbyists and partisan politics. Common sense, they think, suggests that Washington has become so irresponsible, so unresponsive to grassroots ideas, that it's high time to clean house.

If the outrage in rural America is rooted in frustration that a way of life is crumbling and Washington is making things worse, that leaves for consideration the familiar argument that red state politics are driven by such hot-button issues as abortion and homosexuality. Planned Parenthood and LGBTQ advocates regard rural voters as enemies, and rural voters routinely support pro-life and anti-gay policies. The sides are indeed polarized, yet the issues are less straightforward than they seem. The evidence from talking with voters is mixed. Hot-button issues do align with Republican voting and with hopes for overturning *Roe v. Wade*, but in daily life opinions are nuanced. The nuancing reflects the compassion that may be present for a neighbor who has had an abortion or a best friend who is gay. The polarization is sharpened by organized interests that mobilize well-funded statewide campaigns that even local voters sometimes believe are serving multiple aims.

And what of the argument that “rural” essentially means “white” and “white” means bigotry toward people who are not “white”? It's true that 85–90 percent of the rural population is white Anglo. It's also true that relatively few rural communities include a substantial minority of African Americans, who, if present, continue to experience segregation, and that many rural communities are populated with growing numbers of Hispanics, who also face discrimination. These are real problems that should not be ignored. Rural residents who are African American or Hispanic describe in no uncertain terms how their lives are still affected by these patterns—how they

struggle with inhumane working conditions and with threats of harassment and deportation.

White residents, in contrast, emphasize minor gains that may have been made, such as the election of a black or Hispanic candidate to the town council, but their comments betray the extent to which the “moral order” is indeed predicated on an assumption of “white-ness.” Diversity for diversity’s sake is rarely valued, and if it is, it means something incremental and usually symbolic. Rural communities may not be as racist or as misogynist as critics sometimes claim, but the racism and misogyny are built into the patterns of life that nearly all-white communities have come to accept. And a part of their anger is assuredly the view that the promotion of diversity is a further intrusion of big government.

Listening as people we spoke with expressed their views, it was sometimes difficult to avoid thinking that what they were saying was patently unreasonable or bigoted. My view is that the researcher’s role is not to argue but to listen respectfully and thus to describe how people interpret their worlds. Within the communities in which they live, much of what rural Americans think and believe is perfectly reasonable. And, for that matter, their outlooks often express positive values and genuine concerns that any fair-minded person should be able to understand. A first measure of understanding for those who live in cities and suburbs, I believe, is to step momentarily inside these communities before articulating disagreements—and certainly before denouncing millions of our fellow citizens as hopelessly deranged.

The outrage of rural America that surprised so many observers during the 2016 presidential election was there well before, and would have been evident had anyone bothered

to look. It did not happen overnight and is unlikely to diminish anytime soon. Rural voters are a minority but have a disproportionate influence in state and national politics. The rural vote needs to be understood if it is to be accurately characterized and criticized. It cannot be understood through a simple declensionist narrative about the economic grievances of rural America. While many rural communities are struggling, many others are doing just fine. The rural population may be declining as a percentage of the total U.S. population, but in absolute terms it is not. Rural residents are not leaving in droves because they'd rather live in cities. They don't, and the ones who do leave are being replaced through natural increase and immigration. Understanding the variations and central tendencies of rural voters requires spending time listening and trying to see the world through local eyes. As is true of any other segment of our nation, rural lives are complex. And to gain insights into this complexity, we must begin with a clearer view of rural communities—not as demographic categories but as the places in which people make their homes, pursue their dreams, and enact their obligations to one another. That is the basis from which to seek the sources of rural outrage and to critically assess its role in our nation's politics.