



CENTER *for* RURAL AFFAIRS

LESSONS FOR ADVOCATES IN SMALL TOWN AND RURAL POLL

BY CHUCK HASSEBROOK, FORMER EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR RURAL AFFAIRS

This poll of rural voters reveals great potential support for organizations and elected officials who fight to protect small-town and rural life.

Rural and small-town Americans are strongly committed to their way of life and concerned that it is dying. They want government to invest in strengthening their communities and creating genuine opportunity in them. They support help for the working poor. But they are also deeply skeptical of the efficiency and effectiveness of government.

The poll of rural voters in the Great Plains, Midwest and Southeast was commissioned by the Center for Rural Affairs and conducted during the summer of 2013 by the bipartisan team of Celinda Lake of Lake Research Associates and Ed Goetas of the Tarrance Group. Respondents reflected the partisan makeup of rural America. They were 42 percent Republican, 25 percent Democrat, and 25 percent Independent. Many of the findings held across party lines.

IT'S ABOUT THE WAY OF LIFE

The strongest response on the survey was to the statement: *"The rural and small-town way of life is worth fighting for and protecting."* On a scale of 1-10, 65 percent of those who responded scored it a 10, and another 15 percent scored it 8-9. At the same time, rural Americans recognize the life they value is under grave threat. Seven out of 10 say the small-town and rural way of life may be dying. Most believe government is ignoring the problem rather than helping.

This suggests a call to action focused on strengthening the rural and small-town way of life may be best for inspiring rural and small-town Americans to get involved. As rural Americans, we strongly value our way of life and understand it is at risk.

TALK ABOUT RURAL COMMUNITIES AND SMALL TOWNS

The federal government defines counties as rural if they include or are adjacent to no city of over 50,000 people. That leads many advocates to use the term "rural" to encompass both small towns and countryside. But there is a problem. The people who live in those places don't necessarily think of them as rural communities.

We asked poll respondents to tell us whether they live in a rural community, on a farm or ranch, or in a small town. Thirteen percent said they live on a farm or ranch. The others were more likely to say they live in a small town than in a rural community. A dictionary definition of the word *rural* is "in the countryside" rather than "in town." Consistent with that, many who live in so-called "rural" places say they live in a small town, not a rural community.

We can ensure that "rural" people understand we are referring to their communities by referring to *small towns and rural communities* rather than just *rural communities*.

FARM PROGRAMS VERSUS RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Some rural development advocates cast disparaging eyes on federal farm programs, arguing they should be cut and the funds shifted to rural development.

But that argument does not get much support from small-town and rural people, unless the farm program cuts are focused on large farms. Only 23 percent support diverting funds from farm programs per se to broader investments in small towns, small business, and rural communities. But there is majority support for financing such investments by reducing subsidies to big and mega farms.

Both results hold across party lines. There is bipartisan support for shifts from big farms to broader

rural and small-town programs, but little support, irrespective of party identification, for across-the-board cuts in farm programs to fund rural development.

That is not to suggest that focusing on farm programs is the best way to win small-town and rural support. In fact, 85 percent of poll respondents found it convincing (45 percent very convincing) to say: *“Rural America used to be about farming and ranching. But we have changed. Today, fewer than one-in-10 rural people live or work on a farm or ranch. Our economic policies have NOT changed. Now a few larger factory farms get most of the federal funding. The majority of rural America sees very little economic development. We need to change that and invest in beginning farmers, small businesses, and new technology.”*

Most rural and small-town Americans don’t farm, but the way many candidates and elected officials talk to them has not caught up. Many candidates focus almost entirely on farm and ranch issues, while failing to address the broader investments that rural and small-town people need and support.

There is very strong support for investments in small business development and other forms of community and economic development. Three-fourths support tax credits and investment in new transmission lines for development of renewable electric generation in rural areas. Three-fourths support expansion of grants and loans to improve Internet service in small towns and rural areas. And eight-in-10 support grants and loans to revitalize small towns through upgrades to water and sewer systems and investments in roads and bridges.

RURAL AND SMALL-TOWN AMERICA CONCERNED ABOUT INEQUALITY; COMMITTED TO OPPORTUNITY

Rural Americans are concerned about inequality. Three-fourths agree that “America’s future is weakened by a widening gap between the rich and families struggling to make ends meet.” A 2012 Pew Research Center poll found similar sentiments among all Americans, with 62 percent saying the income gap is growing, and it’s a bad thing.

A sizeable minority of rural Americans believes the rules governing the road to success are unfair. While 49 percent agree that *“In America, everyone has an equal shot at being financially secure if they*

work hard and play by the rules,” 42 percent believe that *“In America, you have a hard time getting ahead because the rules favor a wealthy few.”* Agreement drops to 34 percent when asked about only rural America, so small-town and rural people are less likely to believe the rules are rigged within their own communities than in America as a whole.

Nevertheless, the finding suggests that many rural Americans would be supportive of efforts to provide a fair shot and level playing field for all. For example, three-fourths of respondents agree that too much of federal farm subsidies go to the largest farms, hurting smaller family farms.

A review of the polling literature suggests that how we address inequality makes all the difference in gaining support. A poll of Americans (not rural Americans per se) found that only 36 percent favored *“Government policies that promote fairness by narrowing the gap between rich and poor, making the rich pay their fair share, and reducing income inequality,”* when given that choice or the alternative of *“promoting opportunity by fostering job growth, encouraging entrepreneurs, and allowing hardworking people to keep more of what they earn,”* which gained 58 percent support. (Source: Resurgent Republic Survey, Aug, 2012. The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html)

Rural Americans and all Americans are concerned about inequality and committed to opportunity. Efforts to stem rising inequality by providing genuine opportunity to all, reducing favoritism for the rich, and giving everyone a fair shot are well received in rural America. For example, 85 percent of respondents favor preschool programs to prepare lower-income children to succeed in school.

But there is resistance to messages that imply inequality should be addressed by imposing heavier taxes on the rich to give to the poor.

There was, however, more support than opposition for paying for investments in rural and small-town programs by repealing the Bush tax cuts for families earning more than \$250,000 (47 percent to 42 percent). Repealing those tax cuts gained majority support among Democrats and Independents, but Republican opposition. Large majorities of Democrats, Independents, and Republicans opposed across-the-board tax increases.

SUPPORT FOR THE WORKING POOR

Rural Americans express strong support for help to the working poor. Six-in-10 respondents say government has some or a lot of responsibility to help the working poor advance economically (versus a little or none). About half of Republicans and over six-in-10 Independents agree.

About eight-in-10 respondents strongly or somewhat support job training to improve earnings by the working poor, Medicaid for health coverage of the working poor, and helping the working poor afford necessities through payroll tax refunds like the Earned Income Tax Credit. Each of these measures draws support from at least seven-in-10 Republicans and eight-in-10 Independents.

Anti-poverty programs will receive greater support among rural voters to the extent it is demonstrated that they primarily provide needed help to the working poor. A June 2012 Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research poll found similar support for helping the working poor among Americans (not rural per se).

However, a poll of Americans (not rural per se) found a narrow majority agree that “government programs to help the poor do more to make people dependent on such assistance” than to “help people in need to get back on their feet.” Respondents were more likely to agree than disagree that “most people receiving welfare payments are taking advantage of the system, rather than genuinely in need of assistance.” (Source: Public Religion Research Institute Race, Class and Culture Survey, Aug, 2012. The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html)

The word “working” makes all the difference in determining whether rural Americans and other Americans are responsive to messages about helping the poor. Demonstrating that most beneficiaries of assistance programs are poor in spite of working will help build rural support.

OWNING YOUR OWN BUSINESSES IS IMPORTANT IN SMALL-TOWN AND RURAL AMERICA

Rural and small-town Americans are drawn to entrepreneurship. Over half said that “owning my own business or farm is a big part of the American dream for me.”

Support for public policies that help small business and beginning farmers is strong across party lines. Over 85 percent of Republicans, Democrats, and Independents strongly or somewhat favor helping “small and owner-operated businesses and farms get started and grow through loans, tax credits, and training.” Over 70 percent of Republicans, Democrats and Independents agree with helping small business by cutting taxes, reducing spending, and reducing regulations on business.

The findings also have implications for small-town and rural community efforts to draw and retain residents. Entrepreneurial communities that support widely held aspirations to “own my own business” will be attractive to a large segment of rural and small-town Americans.

MIXED VIEWS ON GOVERNMENT

Rural Americans want government to serve them in new ways, but they are skeptical about its effectiveness and size.

When asked whether “it is time for government to have a stronger role in strengthening rural communities and making the economy work for the average person in rural and small-town America” OR whether “turning to big government to solve our rural and small-town economic problems will do more harm than good” a narrow plurality (47 percent - 44 percent) agreed that it is time to help the rural economy.

The responses did reflect party affiliations, but not perfectly. Democrats were most strongly supportive of government action. Independents were supportive (49 percent – 39 percent). And even a sizeable 37 percent minority of Republicans was supportive of a stronger role, versus a 58 percent majority who said it would be harmful.

The mixed view of government was also reflected in response to statements by hypothetical Senate candidates. About 90 percent of respondents said both of the following two very different statements were persuasive, with only very soft correlation to party affiliation. Women and young adults were most responsive to the first message about investing in small business and schools and less responsive to the second, message of “get government out of the way.”

1. *Making rural America stronger is good both short term and long term. It will offer our children and grandchildren the opportunity to stay here, maintaining our way of life and protecting our values. By creating a stronger economy, investing in small businesses and schools, we can help working and middle-class families get ahead. We can create stronger communities so young people can choose to stay and make a life for themselves here in rural and small-town America.*
2. *What we can do to help rural America is get government out of the way, keep taxes low, and give entrepreneurs the freedom to start a business, grow that business, and hire more people. The free market can work; especially in rural and small-town America, because we work hard and have strong family values and faith. Big government means more complications, too many regulations, and higher taxes – those are problems we don't need in rural America.*

By all indications, rural and small-town Americans would like government to do more to strengthen their communities, and at the same time are skeptical of its size and effectiveness.

They will be responsive to efforts to make government work for them and their communities by helping low-wage rural workers and investing in rural community development, renewable energy, and small business and beginning farmer programs.

Rural and small-town Americans view the world through a populist lens. But support for government action is tempered. Support for federal small business development initiatives will be strongest if accompanied by efforts to address the disproportionate burden some federal regulations place on small enterprise. Support for new investments by government will be stronger if accompanied by cuts in ill-advised government spending, such as excessive subsidies for mega farms.

Rural Americans don't want more government. They want the government they have to be more responsive to their problems. They want it to be smarter, more effective, and more efficient.

Respondents also want politicians to be more responsive to problems in their communities. Three-fourths say that *"Problems in rural and small-town America are ignored while politicians pay more attention to the issues of urban and suburban areas."* There

is strong support for investing greater attention and resources in the problems of small towns and rural areas.

CONCLUSION

The bottom line is fairly simple. Rural and small-town Americans strongly believe their way of life is good and worth preserving. They prize independence and ownership and retain a deep sense of doing what is fair. They want a fair shot for the little people who work hard but struggle through no fault of their own.

However, they believe their problems are being ignored by government. They want that to change. They want government to make things better in their communities but are also skeptical about big government and big government programs.