



Perceptions of Rural America:

Congressional Perspectives

The following report is based upon a survey conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, a Democratic research firm, and Greener and Hook, a Republican consulting firm. This bi-partisan survey included 26 Members of Congress, 16 are Democratic House members and Senators and 10 Republican House members and Senators. The research represents a diverse range of states across the country, including states in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, West, Midwest, South and Southwest regions. The in-depth interviews were approximately 20-30 minutes length and took place between December 2001 and April 2002. The research was done at the request of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and is the second in a series of research projects on perceptions of rural America. More information about the Foundation can be found at its website www.wkkf.org including the full version of both rural perceptions research projects.

Introduction

Federal legislators see rural America as an important part of the nation's landscape. As the source of the nation's food supply, it plays a central role in the vitality of the country. As an incubator of American values, such as self-reliance, stewardship of the land and faith, it represents an important source of American tradition. These are views held by Democrats and Republicans alike and are largely independent of the constituency they represent.


At the same time, policymakers worry about the state of rural America. They see rural communities fraught with economic problems, especially the decline of the family farm in the face of consolidation. With a lack of economic diversity, they see rural America as steadily losing decent job opportunities. Legislators envision looming environmental problems, especially around water scarcity and contamination. They point to the basic lack of infrastructure – access to healthcare, lack of access to the Internet and inadequate transportation – that poses serious challenges to economic, developmental strategies. Some also point to an increasing drug problem, as contributing to not only a decline in the traditional values so prevalent in rural communities, but also as a sign of growing despair in rural America.

Legislators are hard pressed for answers to the problems that face rural America. They agree that in order to help rural communities, they need to improve the rural economy. Rural constituents exert little influence on the policymaking process, and they have fewer representatives in the House of Representatives than urban and suburban areas.

What makes policy making even more challenging, as many legislators on both sides of the aisle point out, the well-organized interests exert a profound effect over rural policy making – particularly on the Farm Bill – that is not always beneficial to the small and mid-size farmer and the rural economy as a whole. Finally, partisan and ideological differences among rural and non-rural legislators make coalition building difficult.

In the current environment, there is no one voice that speaks for rural America, either in the Congress or outside the Congress. There is a reservoir of concern among policymakers about rural issues and belief that something must be done to increase economic opportunities, assist those displaced from family farming in the changing economy, protect the environment, as well as protect as many family farms as possible. Legislators may not agree on the answers – some lean towards government based solutions and others toward the free market – but they agree that something needs to be done.

Rural Values

 Almost universally, legislators agree that rural areas represent something special in American society. They see rural communities as distinctive from the suburbs and cities in a number of ways. Overall, they describe rural citizens and communities as holding a more conservative and religious set of values. This characterization is not necessarily political; as one Republican from the Northeast says; rural citizens are, “very thoughtful, fairly conservative, not politically conservative but conservative in terms of money, taking care of the land and so forth.” These values are rooted in life circumstances and the lifestyle of rural citizens. One Democrat from the Northeast, for instance, described the way religion and religious institutions support poor communities:

Put suburban aside. You know it is not uncommon as you go to some of the poorest areas in the country, and in this state, you will find a very active religious community. And that is true of urban areas and also true of rural areas. So I think too many people incorrectly associate poverty with a lack of values (Democrat, Northeast).

Legislators also invoke self-reliance and the work ethic of rural Americans, rooting these values in the difficulty of farm work and the fact that communities, which are smaller and interconnected, keep each other honest.

Self-reliant...people who are closer to American values. Sort of a different way of looking at things because everybody pretty much knows everybody. You mess up, everybody knows it. There's just more of an honesty ethic and a work ethic (Republican, Mid-Atlantic).

I think that this is a very strong, proud tradition in rural America. (There is) a lot of reliance on family and neighbors in order to meet the demands of everyday life that exist there, and an incredibly strong work ethic. Just given the nature of their jobs and what they do (Democrat, Midwest).

Legislators who grew up in rural areas made this point even more emphatically. In their experience or in the memories of their parents and grandparents, the fact that people are more likely to know each other and take care of each other makes rural communities more

nurturing than urban or suburban areas. The interconnected nature of rural life means that residents rely on teamwork to get things done, even if that only means fielding a basketball team.


You know, I grew up in a small town. Everyone looks out for each other. But the kids especially when they go to school, the schools are not so large, but they can participate in just about everything and you know, you don't have to be a superstar basketball player to be on the basketball team, and you learn the values of team work and participation and you have an opportunity to try many different things and see where you can fly, and I think it is because of that sort of nurturing environment for our kids that so many leaders for our countries come from small towns (Republican, Midwest).

The rural life, for my father, where he grew up during the depression, probably created a sense of values that I think were very different than what was going on in the rest of the country, especially the urbanized areas. There was a work ethic. There was a contribution to family. There was a connection everybody knew who everybody was and they are aware of each other's businesses. If you were a kid getting in trouble your parents learned about it very quickly and so it was all tied together (Democrat, Southwest).

Even while legislators hold these views, they acknowledge that rural citizens do not necessarily have “better” values than people living in urban and suburban areas. Rather, they see rural residents living in a particular set of circumstances and with a certain tradition that means that rural citizens make a cultural contribution to the fabric of the nation:

I think it's part of the tapestry of America. I think it's a different way of life. It's sort of the last resistance against modernization, the suburbanization of America (Democrat, West).

How Legislators See Rural America

 Legislators maintain a rich and complex view of rural life. They do not simply equate rural with agriculture. There is no question that farming and the plight of the family farm dominate many discussions of rural policy, but legislators – especially from rural areas – know that the challenges of rural America go beyond agriculture. Region is the most important source of variation among legislators; whether a member of Congress resides in the Midwest, the South, the West or the Northeast, makes an enormous difference in how they think about the issues facing rural America and the possible solutions.

Members from Western parts of the country naturally place a higher priority on the availability of water than those who represent less arid parts of the country. There is little agriculture along the lines of what is seen in the Midwest; instead, industries such as ranching and mining predominate. They are engaged in contentious debates about the use of public land for industry and recreation.

But we are often the ones raising issues that are different, like water. It is not just Western rural issues, but it is an issue, or different attitudes on mining or grazing or on energy, and oil gas, the extracting industries, public lands, which are not even understood as an issue east of the Mississippi (Republican, Southwest).

In the South, the local economies are diversifying, particularly with the increase in light manufacturing and alternative animal crops, such as catfish. Legislators struggle with issues, such as the impact of NAFTA on job retention and fundamental issues of poverty, such as the lack of running water.

...My questions and problems in almost any given day could run the gamut of transportation, water sewage, disability requirements, agriculture, a small farmer could be a bigger farmer...I still have significant population without running water (Democrat, South).

In the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions, legislators who often have small rural communities quite frequently encounter issues with specialty farming – cranberries, horse farms, and truck farmers (farmers who sell out of their trucks at roadside stands – that are not typically included in farm subsidy programs). They are invested in the dairy compact, as the Northeast has a substantial dairy industry, but they are often at the margins of large agricultural debates.

The amount of land engaged in traditional family farming has declined to very small levels. In the South, East, and Mid-Atlantic, when land is removed from production, it generally is utilized for other more profitable purposes. Thus, while it may be true that agriculture is declining in importance in many of these areas, the result is not necessarily economic disaster. The new use of the land reflects growth, not decline, in populations. It reflects an increase in economic diversity. This is not always the reality to be sure, but the difference in the decline in agricultural activity that takes place in these areas than in previous years and the situation in the Midwest is stark.

For the Midwest, agricultural issues occupy a more prominent place, even though other areas of the country indeed have considerable farming interests. Preserving farmland for agriculture is seen as more vital here than in other parts of the country. The consolidation of family farms, as they see it, has changed the rural landscape of the Midwest for the worse. One Republican from the Midwest describes the impact of the “vertical and horizontal integration of the food chain,” as “squeezing out” family farms:

From producing, marketing and processing livestock to planting, harvesting and processing raw commodities, the trend towards consolidation and concentration in the food industry is squeezing out independent family farms and leaving fewer choices for consumers at the grocery stores. This is a very disturbing trend (Republican, Midwest).

Others say the decline of the family farm means that the nation loses an essential part of the nation's landscape.

But we're also losing a very important part of American life, and that is the family farm, and the impact that has in rural America on communities. The more you go out of business, the more pressure there is then for the big operations that come in and take over. And some of that could be sustainable, but I would venture to guess it wouldn't be as sustainable as smaller family operations (Democrat, Midwest).

The decline of the family farm, of course, affects the entire rural landscape because towns lose population, which in turn affects small businesses and other community institutions:

My dad ran a grocery store, and I can tell you I learned real early that if the farm economy isn't doing very well, then those Main Street merchants in small towns in rural [legislator's state] don't do very well either (Republican, Midwest).

Among these midwestern legislators, there is a sense that when agricultural land stops being used for farming, it simply "dies" for those communities. Unlike other regions of the country, it is rare that farmland gets bought for expensive suburban development. Instead, this land moves from family farming to corporate farming and puts the property out of the reach for ordinary citizens to use for agricultural purposes.

The State of Rural Policy - The Farm Bill

*D*espite the fact that legislators understand the complexity and diversity of rural issues in their areas and even nationally, rural policy making is dominated by agricultural issues and interests. The farm bill, which was debated and voted upon during the course of the research, is the focal point of discussion about rural policy. For many members, however, the farm bill debate invoked larger debates about the role of government in the market, the power of interest groups, and how wealth is distributed in this country.

Legislators fundamentally want to support farmers and farming. The institution of farming is symbolic, representing an important piece of the America tradition, even though few Americans (and fewer each year) make their living from farming.

I usually have voted for farm bills over the years, and I make the case that obviously having a healthy farm community in the country is good for my urban and suburban constituencies, even though I have pockets of rural citizens... (Democrat, Northeast).

Others support traditional farm policies because our nation depends upon low cost food, so there is no choice but to subsidize farming. The ability of other foreign countries to produce food at lower cost, and foreign subsidy programs, means the United States must subsidize farming to both preserve food prices and to have a chance at competing internationally.

I think as long as we have this unwritten cheap food policy that I just talked about; we have to support the farmers because we all have to have their product (Democrat, Midwest).

I think that it is a national security issues, and I think everyone benefits from having low prices for food. We spend less per capita in this country than any other country on food, and we have really good food quality (Republican, Midwest).

One Democratic legislator from the South, while having his own problems with the subsidy system, argues that simply opening up farming to the free market would have devastating effects on farmers, certainly in the short run. As he puts it, “the cultural cost to just an open market system in agriculture where you would have the depletion, you would just have the depopulation of large parts of rural America.”

But there is a fair amount of criticism of the farm bill and the current subsidy system. Many legislators see agriculture policy dominated by large agricultural interests, who are well organized and funded in both their lobbying and research efforts. There is no question that some legislators see industry’s voices as more powerful than smaller family farmers or other non-farming rural constituencies.

...Virtually any other area of government, the large beneficiaries are going to be very vocal and very present and always giving you their carefully researched and lobbied point of view, where the people who are going to pay the bill don't even know the issue exists because it is a penny cost to them and they aren't going to get excited about it, so the interest always captures these issue and they always will (Republican, South).

It's the food industry, the corn industry, the cotton industry...all of them. It's tough to compete with people who have resources to make things happen versus people who don't. And unless there are public interest entities out there that promote this, then you get very little public policy made by the people without power (Democrat, South).

They have clout disproportionate to their numbers. They are well organized, know the political game, and put together their legislative programs skillfully. They are an appealing constituency with a good deal of sympathy in the wider community (Democrat, South).

Many legislators are disturbed by their perception of the inequities in the subsidy system that benefits corporate and wealthy farmers, without supporting the small family farm. This view was held among Democrats and Republicans, who voted for and against the most recent versions of the farm bill in the House and Senate.

To me the other thing is that the subsidies really have nothing to do with the farmers, it's really about taking care of corporate interests, very large farmers... You see, people who lost their family farm except none of the government funds go to help the family farm, it's sort of like the policy is a complete disconnect because it needs family farmers (Democrat, West).

Well, the farmer is supposed to benefit, but the farmer isn't like the one that comes to mind...like my grandfather. Now you've got so many corporate farms. The farmer many times now is subordinate to corporations or larger entities. The farmer's benefit is somewhat more indirect than direct benefits to the corporate farmers and others like that (Republican, South).

Some Republicans are also bothered by their belief that the government is subsidizing the farm system and the “anti-competitive” trends in corporate farming.

I don't know any other business that you have to have a government program that you can even borrow money to operate your business from the get go, except agriculture. So we are building a dependence on government, even down to putting seed in the ground; it's coming back to really haunt us (Republican, South).

I know just from the work I do that there are huge problems, but I think those problems are in part because of the way the government has messed around in what we're doing for farmers. We've affected the farm economy in such a way to make life hard for a number of people (Republican, Northeast).

Legislators recognize there are not a lot of easy answers to the problems of agricultural policy. They feel stuck in a system that is captive of multiple interests and encapsulates other programs, such as Food Stamps, that are impossible to vote against. A number of Democrats supported the Kind Amendment as the beginning of an answer to the subsidy system. The amendment to the farm bill, introduced by Congressman Ron Kind of Wisconsin, allocated conservation money to smaller farmers who did not receive subsidies under the current system. A number of legislators saw this program as a way of supporting sustainable and value-added agricultural practices, which they believe can be helpful to small family farmers as well as protect the environment.

Some legislators from rural states and districts talk about innovations in value-added agriculture as a way of supporting the family farm and boosting the economy. Legislators support the production of ethanol and other renewal energy sources, such as “bio-diesel,” specialty crops such as hothouse tomatoes, wool-producing cooperatives, lamb processing plants, and textile mills. But these innovations are not on the radar screen of non-rural legislators.

Finally, a number of legislators talk about the need for “open trade” so that American commodities can compete in the international marketplace. Republican legislators, in particular, are strong advocates for trade agreements that open up markets to American goods. But other legislators note the challenges posed by the realities of the world market. A Republican

from the South argues that the United States does not have a production problem, but rather a price problem making it difficult to compete with “developing countries” that produce cheap agriculture. A Republican from the West concurs: “Not having a free trade agreement means that there are not enough ready markets for the products produced by agricultural efforts.” Similarly, a Democrat from the South explains,

We had a lot of expectations of expanding markets overseas would help, and it did help for a while, but then we had economic problems in Russia and Asia and then people around the world started making products. Brazil and China, Brazil grows a tremendous amount of soybeans. South Vietnam and Korea grow tremendous amounts of rice. China has bales and bales of cotton and all these products contribute to depressed world prices (Democrat, South).

The Problems Facing Rural America

There is near universal agreement that job loss and the overall lack of economic opportunities is the most serious problem facing rural America. Across partisan and regional lines, legislators agree that rural America has been devastated by the decline of the family farm and the difficulty of attracting industry to rural areas. Most Republicans and Democrats believe the key to the future viability of rural America rests in creating a more diverse economy.

Legislators across the ideological spectrum express a great deal of concern about the prevalence of low paying jobs and worry about how to get businesses to invest in rural areas. They note that young people leave rural areas seeking higher education and job opportunities, contributing to the depopulation of rural areas.

I think that probably the complaint I hear the most from individuals about living in the rural areas is that the kids believe they have to leave in order to get an education, but they have to leave to get work and there is a tug on the family structure because of that. It's a difficult situation (Democrat, Southwest).

Almost equally important, legislators are united in their concern about access to healthcare. This is particularly acute among those who represent rural areas.

The country doc is history. Not there anymore. You know going around and delivering babies, uh-huh, forget it. The doctor is gone, didn't come back. His son went to medical school and stayed in the big city (Democrat, South).

In rural areas, as most legislators see it, the healthcare problem is more complicated than in urban areas. One legislator notes that rural communities tend to have more small businesses that do not offer health insurance, which means their employees put an extra burden on the rural healthcare system. Other legislators discuss the lack of adequate transportation to get

to rural hospitals, let alone specialized care. Other legislators are very upset about the Medicare and Medicaid reimbursement system, which puts extra financial strain on the poor rural counties that cannot match federal dollars.

A short list of items always on my radar screen, include: fixing the Medicare payment disparity and securing benefits for Medicare dependent hospitals and healthcare clinics (Republican Midwest).

Another policy I will promote in Washington is to exempt the one hundred poorest counties in the country from any federal match for any federal funding whatsoever, whether it's highways or healthcare. It is simply counterproductive to tell counties, which have trouble maintaining an operating budget as it is, that they get no federal money unless they come up with matching funds. We might as well be honest and tell them we can't help at all in the first place. (Democrat, South).

We've got in this state sort of a healthcare crisis. We are dead last in terms of Medicare reimbursements. It's really affecting small towns and rural hospital (Republican, Midwest).

Of course, many legislators acknowledge that the problems of job loss and inadequate economic opportunities are not unrelated to poor access to healthcare and troubles with the education system.

Legislators did not offer many solutions. Some talk about rural enterprise zone, tax credits for business that locate in rural communities, and providing funds through the Small Business Association. Legislators express great hope that rural areas can attract businesses with an available workforce that has a strong commitment to hard work:

And they [companies] said these sons and daughters of farm families are very versatile people. They can learn quickly, and they have a good work ethic and those are the people we want in our plants, so it strikes me that the work ethic and that image of rural America can work well for creating new business opportunities in small town America (Democrat, Midwest).

But all members agree upon the need to expand access to the Internet. Broadband is universally seen as a way to open up economic opportunities to rural America. As they see it, high tech companies could be lured to rural areas with tax credits and low labor costs, if rural areas actually had comprehensive broadband.

I think the most important thing is to have jobs for those kids when they graduate from high school and college, that are good jobs in those areas and that is why...it is so vitally important it will be for our rural and small town areas to be connected to the Internet with high speed data transmission (Republican, Midwest).

I wouldn't have said this three years ago, but I guess I didn't know much about it then, but I'd say high speed communication because if you can connect in a small rural town with high speed communication, there are things you can do there, maybe not in the real rural areas, where you got 600 people in 2,800 square miles or something, but in small towns you can do things that you only used to be able to do in large cities (Republican, Southwest).

One of the solutions to that is that, I believe, and I believe most people believe (that it) is better access to modern telecommunications, broadband, making broadband available no matter where they are in the country. I think that is one way to allow people to live in rural communities and still be involved in the modern economy, but we haven't done a very good job of that so far (Democrat, Southwest).

Beyond the Internet, many legislators argue that rural communities cannot attract industry without broader investment in infrastructure. Even if businesses are drawn to rural areas by tax incentives, employers are challenged to provide adequate access to healthcare, educational opportunities, water and sewage, and transportation systems. Lawmakers are daunted by the challenges posed by trying to provide these services to rural areas. Moreover, some are cross-pressured on these matters. On the one hand, they want to contribute to increasing the diversity of the economies in rural areas, and thus economic opportunity for those who live there. But many, on the other hand, do not want to constantly make it easier to take land away from agricultural use and have more family farms go out of existence.

Everybody stands up during a campaign and says things like, we are going to bring these companies in. There are reasons why companies have not gone to these areas. There aren't the distribution systems, there aren't the transportation systems. There isn't the quick access to other cities, and so many of the businesses decide to concentrate on the areas that are more urban (Democrat, Southwest).

You have to decide what's short term for your community and what's long term. That 300-employee industry is very long term. But what are you going to do in the interim? What are you going to do about your housing stock? What are you going to do about your educational system? What you are you going to do about your healthcare system? All those things that industry is going to look at, before they decide to come (Democrat, South).


Many rural areas do not have adequate infrastructure to bring larger industries, so transportation and infrastructure are barriers that rural America faces (Republican, South).

While lawmakers acknowledge these infrastructure disparities, some balk at the degree of government investment required to provide these kinds of services.

I don't see how we are going to go and step up to the plate and fix their economic problems. I just don't see it...you are dealing with such small numbers. You go to a town of 800 people, and you want to help the people and you might be helping 20 of them. There is certain infrastructure cost that any government program has, that is just very difficult to put in any services like that (Republican, South).

The truth of the matter is a lot of times, policy and the way we handle things, both tax policy as well as regulatory policy, can greatly improve or greatly restrict what happens. So I think we need in this country a policy that we do more on education and the infrastructure side for rural America. But we can't – if you created the Rural American Grant Fund for Economic Development in Washington, it would be like most other programs in Washington. It would be a fishing expedition for specific products (Republican, South).

Preserving the Rural Environment

 Legislators also have concerns about the impact of agricultural practices on the environment and future of the rural environment itself. Lawmakers place high value on the beauty of rural land.

You may live in the heart of New York City, but as you see this tranquil scene of livestock in the field and the ducks and the farmers out there cultivating and harvesting, I think you have to associate with that. This is man, nature, God, the elements, meshing and working together to sustain life (Democratic, Midwest).

Many worry about the farming practices that pollute rivers and streams, whether that means waste run off from hog farms, or contamination of drinking water from pesticides and chemicals. Some believe that it is often the family farmer, operating on smaller margins with fewer resources that engage in this practice more than the large corporate farmer.

I run into issues probably if not daily, almost. Whether it's issues dealing with groundwater or wells and a lot of environmental issues... Which pesticides should be allowed, all kind of things like that (Republican, Mid Atlantic).

I think the environment is the big issue that troubles me the most... We will come to realize the reason why [town in state] for twenty years has been putting a warning in every monthly water bill to not let infants drink the water is because the chemicals in the river going to the reservoir provides the drinking water; they are all linked together. Virtually every lake in downstate has a scare related to some chemicals or some contamination that has some origination on a farm (Democrat, Midwest).

Clean water issues concern legislators whether they represent rural communities or not; in fact, one Democratic legislator suggest that taking on the pesticides and chemicals run-off may be a way to build rural and suburban coalitions around environmental protection. Another Democrat legislator from the Midwest explains that states simply do not have the resources to clean up their waste issues, especially since waste often crosses state lines to pollute the drinking water in other states. While he argues that local and state governments must solve the waste run-off problem, it is possible to imagine regional coalitions around waste management.

While there is agreement that clean water is an issue, people acknowledge the tensions as well. There is resistance to environmental regulations, and some legislators acknowledge the economic tradeoffs, “we need reasonable regulations on the environment that is based on common sense and some cost benefit analysis” (Republican, Midwest). Another Republican legislator from the West makes the case that environmentalists are a barrier to helping rural America because their rigid regulations inhibits economic growth:

Intransigent environmentalists who would rather just stop things than come up with a solution that protects the environment but also allows people to make a living. They can be so absolute in their thinking, even when there isn't much science to back up what they are claiming. It gets so emotional, and people want to do the right thing. It can mean that rigid regulations get put into place, even when those regulations don't do any more to protect the environment than more reasonable ones that would let people continue to work (Republican West).

Second, concerns abound regarding over development. Maintaining open space is a real issue in the East, Mid-Atlantic, and South. As suburbs grow out from cities, farmland is taken out of agricultural production and becomes the sites of luxury homes. Land prices become inflated, making it difficult for rural citizens to afford staying in their communities, living and working as they had previously. Concerns exist about how suburban sprawl affects tourism, a major industry of rural areas, especially in the east and Mid-Atlantic.

Who Speaks for Rural America?

*R*ural interests are muted, in part, because of the reality of the distribution of the population. While rural states receive disproportionate representation in the U.S. Senate, there are very few rural members in the House of Representatives. Many members characterize the difficulty raising rural issues on the congressional agenda due to a lack of numbers.

Rural America is less congested and the population growth continues to gravitate to metropolitan centers on the coasts and Sun Belt states. That means fewer rural-oriented lawmakers are getting elected. We must form coalitions with each other and urban-oriented legislators to advance rural initiatives (Republican, Midwest).

I think it comes down to the simple fact, you have fewer representatives in the rural parts of the country and here in Congress, so you never have the majority. And it's tough to move out the critical mass or consensus with the rest of our colleagues because the majority of the members of the House don't have a farm in the district. So to get them interested in farm life, or to get them interested in rural health issues could be somewhat challenging (Democrat, Midwest).

A huge barrier is that there are very few members of Congress that actually represent completely rural areas, and so as the population shifts, two thirds of the country lives within 50 miles of the coast...And so you don't have any spokes people for rural America (Democrat, South).

But even with this challenge, legislators agree that no one voice speaks for rural America. They are hard pressed to think of a nationally prominent rural advocate. Many Republican legislators turn to the Farm Bureau for information and expertise on agricultural matters, but they cannot cite any single person as being the identifiable voice for rural America.

...But could I say that I could name somebody who is really a great champion for rural America? There may be a Governor who stood out for a time. I'm not sure that I could say they are really championing rural American (Republican member, Southwest).

I don't know on the American landscape that there's an identifiable individual that I think about when it comes to leadership on rural issues in total, or as a focus. It generally ends up being by commodity and by region at best. The tobacco people certain... The peach people, particularly the specified crops or boutique crops. The ethanol people, the corn folks out in the Midwest. I could tell you who talks about ethanol. But those are all specific. That's like the Coca-Cola Company has a lobbyist but they don't usually get beyond issues that affect Coca-Cola (Republican, South).

I wish we could see more – there are many different groups that are working on this. I would like to see them sort of come together under some type of umbrella... There are groups out there for housing development and groups that are out there working on the environment. There are groups that are out there working primarily on commodities (Republican, South).

There is also a perception of a fundamental lack of understanding about the issues that face different regions in the country. As some legislators see it, their colleagues from different areas of the country simply do not understand their issues. A Republican legislator from the Southwest bemoans that legislators from the East do not understand issues like mining - “the closest they had ever been to a mine is when they went to a dentist” – but they have had to cast votes that deeply affected the economy of the Western region. One Democrat from the Northeast argues that rural legislators cannot achieve consensus on how to address their agricultural issues, making it difficult for non-rural legislators to coalesce around a rural agenda. Exasperated, one Republican from the South argues that every single member of Congress has his or her own idea about the rural agenda.

Maybe I missed it. I'm not the best-read guy in the world. If anybody as formulated an agenda for rural America that's broader than a specific agricultural product or region of the country, I certainly haven't head of it... I imagine if you interviewed all 435 of us in the House, you'll get 435 other answers, none of which will have anything to do with an agenda, an institution or an individual that's an outspoken leader on rural issues (Republican, South).

Ideological and partisan differences also present challenges to coalition building, especially the notion of creating urban/rural alliances to take on an issue, such as healthcare or education.

You tend to look at rural areas as being a place where you want to protect traditional values, good or bad. Some of these values are not so good. Because I know in our Democratic caucus, rural people tend to look at those of us from more urban areas like, you're just one of those liberals from [legislator's state], and you don't really understand what real life is like. And you tend to look at them as people who are trying to block progress in civil rights and hand everybody guns, which is a stereotype that is not entirely fair (Democrat, Northeast).


They also see partisanship challenging their ability to work on key problems in their districts and states. Others talk about the fierce attachment to notions of individualism and self-reliance found in rural communities, and the challenge this poses to proposing government solutions:

They don't come together, and when they do, it is with this cry: keep government out of their lives. If the government doesn't step in some major role there won't be much left to them, as far as I'm concerned (Democrat, Midwest).

Some Republican legislators, while acknowledging the fundamental needs of rural citizens around healthcare and education in a real way, simply do not see government or urban and rural working together as the answer.

I don't think there necessarily needs to be a lot of bridge building. Ultimately, they produce food and we eat and there ought to be a lot more common ground than there is to the extent that we reduce the federal government in the lives of producers. I think they will be more creative (Republican, South).

The Future of Rural Policy Making

lected officials share the view that there is something unique and particular about rural America that deserves attention, protection, and support. Essentially, they believe that rural America, and those who live there, holds to a set of values that are important to preserve. But legislators express some pessimism about rural America. They are disturbed about the death of the family farm and the effect that consolidation has on ordinary farmers, the persistent poverty in rural communities and the difficulty of bringing economic opportunities to rural communities.

Policy makers identify improving the economy of rural areas as the single most important thing to do to assure the viability of the communities and people who live there. Other issues surface as being important – among Democrats, the state of healthcare delivery in rural communities; among Republicans, the problem of rural drug use; and on both sides of the aisle, the environment.

While regional differences — the prominence of agriculture in the Midwest, water in the Southwest, and manufacturing jobs in the South — produce important variation in legislators' priorities, there are mutually agreed upon goals that emerge across ideological and partisan divides.

Among them are:

- Increasing resources to family farmers and rectifying the inequities in the Farm Bill;
- Expanding access to broadband;
- Improving the rural healthcare system;
- Generating incentives for new business starts and job creation in rural communities, and
- Preserving the rural environment.

With these issues in common, an opportunity exists for a wide array of interests and individuals together to formulate a new rural agenda.

About Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research

Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research (GQR) conducts public opinion and strategic research for companies, political campaigns and issue organizations across the globe. Combining surveys and in-depth research methods, and understanding of the social currents mad advice on plans of action, GQR has emerged as one of the premier companies in the research world. They are located at 10 G Street, NE Suite 400 Washington, D.C. with offices in London and Tel Aviv.

About Greener and Hook

Greener and Hook, LLC, is a unique communications consulting firm providing hands-on strategic counsel to corporations, trade associations, ad-hoc organizations and small political clients. The firm's principals possess extensive backgrounds in dealing with situations involving public opinion, public policy and political considerations. They are located at 1875 Eye Street, NW, Suite 540, Washington, DC.

About the W.K. Kellogg Foundation

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation was established in 1930 “to help people help themselves through the practical application of knowledge and resources to improve their quality of life and that of future generations.” Its programming activities center around the common vision of a world in which each person has a sense of worth; accepts responsibility for self, family, community, and societal well-being; and has the capacity to be productive, and to help create nurturing families, responsive institutions, and healthy communities.

To achieve the greatest impact, the Foundation targets its grants toward specific areas. These include health; food systems and rural development; youth and education; and philanthropy and volunteerism. Within these areas, attention is given to the cross-cutting themes of leadership; information systems/technology; capitalizing on diversity; and social and economic community development programming. Grants are concentrated in the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the southern African countries of Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, South Africa, Swaziland and Zimbabwe.

More information about the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and its programs is available on the Foundation’s Web site at www.wkkf.org.