

Project Narrative

The Iowa Small Towns Project was started in 1994 by a team of rural sociologists and economists at Iowa State University with funding from the United States Department of Agriculture. The team randomly selected one town with a population between 500 and 5,000 from each of Iowa's 99 counties and interviewed approximately 100 residents in each community. The questions focused on the quality of life in the towns, with special attention given to residents' perceptions of public services and retail options, and to residents' psychological attachment to their communities. The latter included an impressive array of questions designed to gauge the level of social capital in the towns, both behaviorally and psychologically. These data were used in over two dozen peer-reviewed publications and several dissertations and theses. So successful was the Small Towns project that the research team secured funding to repeat the study in the same communities in 2004 and 2014. Taken together, these three data sets provide an exceptionally rich look at how the attitudes and behaviors of the citizens of small Iowa communities have changed over the last 20 years.

1. Research Plan

The PCC Summers Scholar funds would give us the opportunity to take a deep dive into the 2014 data, integrate it with the 1994 and 2004 data, and link external data on the towns from the US Census and other sources. We will focus on investigating three research questions.

A. Community Attachment

There is a vast literature on the psychological tie to communities, often called community attachment, that goes back over half a century (Kasarda, Janowitz 1974; Goudy 1982). Tom Rice, one of the authors of this PPC proposal, actually used the 2004 wave of the Small Towns project to examine the extent to which white ancestral diversity (e.g., Norwegian, German, Dutch) influenced the sense of community attachment (Rice and Steele, 2001). Our initial look at the 2014 data shows that some of the key questions measuring community attachment declined significantly from the 2004 to 2014, after staying very stable from 1994 and 2004. This is an interesting and important trend. At a time that when states are trying to protect and strengthen their small towns it is bad news that residents' attachment to their towns here in Iowa is declining. After all, it is partly this sense of attachment that we are trying to protect. We will analyze the Small Towns data to add to a small body of work that has already examined the sharp drop between 2004 and 2014 (Flagg, Painter 2019; Kao, Sapp 2020a; Kao Sapp 2020b). Our analysis will supplement the town surveys with other data from the towns, such as economic indicators, broadband availability, and opioid drug use.

B. Politics of Resentment

Scholars have struggled to explain the election of Donald Trump, especially his appeal in rural white American. So far most of the work on this question uses public opinion surveys from the 2016 election (Sides, Tesler & Vavreck 2017; Cook, Hill, Trichka, Hwang, & Sommers 2017) or qualitative studies of small numbers of voters (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2016). One common conclusion is that these rural voters have a deep sense of resentment toward big government, urbanites, social liberals, higher education, and more. They see these groups as controlling political power and the political agenda, and stacking both against them. This thesis may well be right, but it would benefit from a look at these voters across time to see if resentment actually builds in recent decades. The Small Town data is uniquely situated to do this. It looks at the same towns, using many of the same survey questions, from

1994 to 2014, the eve of the Trump vote. The 1994 data take us back to the early years of the Clinton administration, long before resentment was associated with rural America. The Small Towns data allows us to track some dimensions of resentment over time and to see to what degree it has been present in rural Iowa and whether or not it has increased over time.

C. Community Power

Starting in the 1950s and continuing with vigor into the 1980s, social scientists debated whether American communities were governed primarily by elites or whether power was more diffuse (see Smith 1980 for a summary discussion). Empirical work on both sides of this debate relied almost entirely on interviews with business, government, and civic elites. Not one of the studies talked to ordinary citizens, thus missing an important perspective on community power. The 2014 Small Town survey helps fill this void with a battery of questions about community power. For example, town citizens were asked the extent to which they agree or disagree with these statements: “In my community, residents are highly involved in decision-making,” “Most everyone in my community is allowed to contribute to local government affairs if they want to,” and “Residents other than elected officials have influence in my community.” They were also asked the degree to which leadership in their community is: “inclusive or exclusive,” “open-minded or closed-minded,” “dispersed or concentrated,” and “team oriented or divisive.” These questions and others give us the opportunity to examine the extent to which ordinary citizens think that they have influence in community affairs and the extent to which they think their leaders are open to their input. Our work will take as a jumping off point an excellent first look at this data in a recent Iowa State University Extension and Outreach report by Peters (2020).

All three of these research questions are policy relevant. Indeed, policy is at their core. Understanding why citizens feel attached to their rural communities and why this sense of attachment may be declining should be of interest to policy makers at all levels of government who are committed to implementing policies to save our small towns. Understanding why rural voters support Trump helps us understand the electoral dynamics that have led to the rise in nationalism that is shaping American politics and policy. Understanding community power from the perspective of ordinary citizens in Iowa’s small towns helps us understand the policy making process in these communities.

2. Research Team

Tom Rice has published dozens of academic articles in political science, sociology, and psychology journals. Most relevant to the projects outlined in this proposal are his publications using the 1994 and 2004 waves of the Small Towns data (Lekwa, Hibbing, Rice, 2017; Licari, McLean, Rice, 2001; Rice, 2001; Rice, Miller, 1999; Rice, Steele, 2001). The work leading to these articles required a deep understanding of the Small Towns data and the available supplementary data on the towns from the US Census, various state agencies, and a variety of other sources. This experience with the data will be very valuable in the proposed projects.

Colin Lewis-Beck has extensive training in quantitative social science research methods. He regularly teaches methods courses at the University of Michigan Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) summer program. In addition, he has co-authored a monograph on social science research methods (Lewis-Beck & Lewis-Beck, 2015) and has multiple publications in leading statistics journals.

The team of Rice and Lewis-Beck combines extensive knowledge of the data with extensive statistical knowledge. Working together at the PPC this summer allows us to bring this knowledge to bear on the

research questions through hours of face-to-face exploration. There is no substitute for the real-time exchange of ideas and the testing of those ideas. It is concentrated time like this that regularly leads to creative research results.

3. Outcomes

By the end of our stay at PPC we plan to have most of the statistical work done on two of our three proposed projects and outlines for at least two academic articles, one from each project. We plan to finish these articles over the remainder of the summer and submit them to referred academic journals in the fall. We fully expect to return to the Small Towns data at that point and work on additional academic articles, building out ideas that got their genesis during our time at PPC. There are many academic journals in several disciplines that are good outlets for our work. The most likely home for the community attachment project is probably a sociology journal such as the *Journal of Rural Studies*. The politics of resentment project would probably be best suited for a political science journal, such as *State Politics and Policy Quarterly*. The community power project would well-positioned for either a sociology or political science journal, and any of those already mentioned would be good candidates.

We also have a longer-term possible outcome. We were recently delighted to learn that current faculty members and researchers at ISU plan on seeking funds for a 2024 wave of the Small Town project. If our work goes well this summer we would like to meet with the team and see if they are open to having us involved in some way. As noted earlier, Rice was involved in the planning and analysis of the 2004 wave and it was his suggest that lead to the addition of the ethnicity questions resulted in at least two academic publications (Flagg, Painter 2019; Painter, Flagg 2020). Given the popular view that rural America played a key role in the election of Donald Trump, it might prove fruitful to add more political questions to the 2024 wave.

Bibliography

- Cook, A., Hill, N., Trichka, M., Hwang, G., & Sommers, P. (2017). Who voted for Trump in 2016? *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 5(7), 199-210.
- Cramer, K. J. (2016). *The politics of resentment: Rural consciousness in Wisconsin and the rise of Scott Walker*. University of Chicago Press.
- Flagg, C., & M. A. Painter II. (2019). White ethnic diversity in small town Iowa: A multilevel analysis of community attachment. *Rural Sociology*, 84(2): 226-256.
- Goudy, W. J. (1982). Further consideration of indicators of community attachment. *Social Indicators Research* 11, 181-192.
- Hochschild, A. R. (2018). *Strangers in their own land: Anger and mourning on the American right*. The New Press.
- Kasarda, J. D., & Janowitz, M. Community attachment in mass society. *American Sociological Review* 39(3), 328-339.
- Kao, Y. A., & Sapp, S. G. (2020). Is community attachment a determinant of actual migration? An estimate of the social capital, linear-development, and systemic approaches. *Social Science Quarterly*, 101(1): 201-217.
- Kao, Y. A., & Sapp, S. G. (2020). Is social capital a determinant of community attachment. *Sociological Spectrum* 40(2): 136-150.
- Lekwa, V. L., Rice, T. W., & Hibbing, M. V. (2007). The correlates of community attractiveness. *Environment and Behavior*, 39(2), 198-216.
- Lewis-Beck, C., & Lewis-Beck, M. (2015). *Applied regression: An introduction* (Vol. 22). Sage publications.

- Licari, M. J., McLean, W. P., & Rice, T. W. (2001). The condition of community streets and parks: A comparison of resident and nonresident evaluations. *Public Administration Review* 65: 360-368.
- Painter II, M. A., & C Flagg (2020 forthcoming). Trust and white ethnic diversity in small town Iowa. *The Sociological Quarterly*.
- Peters, D. (2020). Why leadership matters for rural community vitality in Iowa. Iowa State University Extension and Outreach SOC 3093.
- Rice, T. W. (2001). Social capital and government performance in Iowa communities. *Journal of urban affairs*, 23(3-4), 375-389.
- Rice, T. W., & Miller, D. The correlates of small town upkeep. *Environment and behavior*, 31, 821-837.
- Rice, T. W., & Steele, B. (2001). White ethnic diversity and community attachment in small Iowa towns. *Social Science Quarterly*, 82(2), 397-407.
- Smith, R. M. (1980). Community power studies: The effect of research biases. *State and Local Government Review*, 12(2), 74-79.
- Sides, J., Tesler, M. & Vavreck, L. (2017). The 2016 election: How Trump won and lost. *Journal of Democracy*. 28(2), 34-44.