Social Capital in Rural Communities

Megan Dively

Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: https://knowledge.library.iup.edu/honors_theses

Recommended Citation

Dively, Megan, "Social Capital in Rural Communities" (2003). Cook Honors College Theses. 75. https://knowledge.library.iup.edu/honors_theses/75

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Knowledge Repository @ IUP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cook Honors College Theses by an authorized administrator of Knowledge Repository @ IUP. For more information, please contact sara.parme@iup.edu.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With grateful appreciation to the members of my thesis committee—Drs. John Sitton, Bernie Ankney and David Chambers—who gave freely of their time, resources, enthusiasm and patience, and without whom this project would not have been possible. Each is a treasure that should be jealously guarded by the university.

Credit for this project is clearly due to Dr. Robert Putnam, whose professional work exhibits what I consider the ideal combination of thought and action.

Many thanks are also extended to the informants and subjects who helped me form my composite sketch of Claysburg and Saltsburg.

Finally, significant credit is due to the Robert E. Cook Honors College, its faculty, and its staff for funding this project and for four years of pushing, prodding, enabling and empowering me to take personal and intellectual risks.
ABSTRACT

In his 2000 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Robert Putnam describes social capital as the value invested in community connectedness and argues for a positive relationship between social capital and democratic participation. Putnam's thesis is tested through qualitative and quantitative research conducted from December 2002 through May 2003 in two small Pennsylvania communities, Claysburg and Saltsburg. A new term, **rural exceptionalism**, is offered to describe the type of social capital and related effects present in these communities.
PROLOGUE

When you’re in a small town, you become keenly aware of your identity as an outsider. The anonymity of urban or suburban places is utterly absent, because everyone knows they don’t know your name—and it matters. After having left for college, each time I come home to Claysburg, I feel like an aberration who doesn’t quite belong (and, by extension, doesn’t completely belong anywhere). After a few days, however, the old familiar speech patterns return, my pace slows down, and I regain a sense of ownership over my surroundings. Visiting other small towns, I use certain verbal and nonverbal signals to establish myself, even for a brief interaction, as an authentic, someone who is sympathetic and familiar with this way of life. Without that ability, pit stops at gas stations and diners would be far less comfortable.

This work is an attempt to better understand the dynamics of these beautiful, unique and fiercely united rural communities.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Capital. The work of major emphasis is Robert Putnam’s 2000 book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. The general definition and parameters of social capital employed in this study are based on Putnam’s work. Putnam positions social capital as analogous to physical, financial, or human capital. According to Putnam, social capital is contained in social networks and interpersonal contacts—connections among individuals—that accrue value based on norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness. While Putnam admits that social capital is quite hard to measure (a problem experienced by this researcher), to paraphrase a certain Supreme Court justice, you know it when you see it. Social capital is important because it builds generalized reciprocity (faith that an altruistic action will in a vague, unpredictable way be returned), trust, community security, and civic virtue—an awareness of the responsibilities and possibilities of citizenship.

Putnam identifies a steady decline in social capital in the United States since the civic boom of the 1950s and 1960s, citing generational change, the rise of television, living patterns (especially suburban triangles), and individual and family financial and time pressures. Additional causes suggested by other scholars include globalization, a youth culture that prioritizes individuality over conformity, disillusionment with public life, dispersion of mass media and demographic change. The root causes of the well-documented decline in social capital are given rather short shrift by Putnam, and other scholars are working to fill in the gaps of what may prove to be a phenomenon of near-chaos.
Consequences of the decline in social capital accrue at both the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels—or, in other terms, in public and private goods—argues Putnam. When social capital declines, individuals will lose personal benefits, including emotional and physical quality of life; across a community, state or nation, participatory democracy suffers, as predicted by Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. Taken to the extreme, an erosion of social capital could mean the breakdown of democracy. From the reverse view, the present debate over the “democratization” of Iraq is a recognition that the symbols, institutions and processes of representative government are hollow without the support of social capital.

While scores of scholars have offered criticisms of Putnam’s work, few challenge it wholesale; James S. Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu offer perspectives that to some degree compete with Putnam, but most social capital scholars attempt to modify some aspect of the theory while agreeing with much of it (Wall, et al). The most common criticism of Putnam’s identification of social capital has centered on the question of whether social capital is merely an elaborately-constructed version of trust. Francis Fukuyama argued in his aptly-titled volume *Trust* that trust is the basic glue in the fabric of postindustrial societies (higher-trust societies produce business organizations with the flexibility needed to adapt to a global economy). While trust is clearly an essential element of social capital, it cannot be reduced to trust alone, because trust is a passive, not an active, quantity. The presence of trust will not necessarily incite someone to action, while Putnam’s conception of social capital includes a distinctly activist element. Hypothetically, a community with a high level of trust may function relatively well in crisis mode, but if people are essentially anti-social and privatistic, social connections and
interactions will be stunted, and problems will be handled reactively rather than proactively. In reality, it is unlikely that such a community would exist; it can be argued that social capital itself is a precursor to high levels of trust.

Social capital is also clearly related to what scores of scholars have discussed under the umbrella of civil society; however, just as social capital is more complex than mere trust, neither can it be reduced simply to civil society. While Putnam places high value on the civic and community organizations that are the lifeblood of civil society (and gratuitously referring to the insights of Tocqueville), he is certain to point out that social capital can exist in informal connections—even single-episode social encounters—and in lasting interpersonal relationships, such as those between friends, family, neighbors and co-workers.

Because social capital is a master of disguise, Putnam draws various differentiations between types of social capital; levels of formality in networks, the creation of individual versus collective goods, and the orientation toward public versus private aims are three distinctions. The most compelling division, however, is that of bridging versus bonding social capital. Essentially, he argues, the institution, network or relationship that carries social capital lies somewhere on a scale between bridging and bonding influences; the former encourages people to take interest, form connections and develop trust across heterogeneous boundaries, while the latter acts upon individuals to identify and take action within some homogeneous network. Many social capital networks lie somewhere in the middle of this range, but others veer sharply in one direction. A formal or informal association that promotes ethnic or religious unity, for example is essentially bonding, because its membership is naturally oriented toward
individuals who carry a common identity or belief. Bible study at a fundamentalist church, ethnic enclaves within a city or town, a meeting of pet rabbit enthusiasts and the Ku Klux Klan are all embodiments of bonding social capital. Conversely, a network or organization that promotes connections across heterogeneous lines embodies bridging social capital. The Rainbow Coalition, most service associations, interfaith councils and a community picnic and are good examples of bridging social capital. Other vestiges of social capital, such as the Boy Scouts, national unions, fraternal organizations and co-worker friendships, exhibit a mix of bonding and bridging tendencies, because the participants have some interest or identity in common (e.g., gender or profession), while other aspects are diverse.

Putnam is eager to point out that while each type of social capital is important and that neither grouping is inherently superior, our present society suffers a relative lack of the bridging social capital that serves to pull entire populations, rather than just factions, together. Place-based bridging social capital, specifically, has given way to function-based bonding social capital, as special interest and “Balkanized” groups have supplanted many community-oriented organizations that require broad consensus to function. Still, some level of bonding social capital is important for an individual’s identity and for group advocacy. Quite simply, both super glue and WD-40 are essential to a functioning world.

Just as the type of social capital can vary, so can the effects on the individual. A distinction between cosmopolitanism (interest in the wider world) and localism (interest in what immediately affects you) is posited by Raymond Ankney. In a matrix of four types of people, community leaders exhibit high localism and cosmopolitanism;
displaced persons are low in both categories; localists are high in localism and low in cosmopolitanism; and cosmopolitans are low in localism and high in cosmopolitanism, naturally. One would expect community leaders to be affected by both bridging and bonding social capital, localists to be primarily bonders, etc.

Rural Sociology. A growing literature examines the unique role of social capital in rural communities. A sampling indicates that rural sociologists are interested in employing social capital theory, but some are concerned with its status as a theory. Castle interprets social capital as a concept that is useful across disciplines, but asserts that it cannot be considered a theory or an expression of normative goals. Wall states that, “while social capital has value & appeal as a new term, (the) basic theory needs greater development.”

Two interesting studies of rural social capital were conducted by Hoffert and Smith. The former found that rural people are “more likely to exchange exclusively with kin,” particularly in the exchange of financial assistance. The latter researcher found that children of communities with high social capital are more likely to attend college; the only stronger predictor for rural students is parental expectation.
THESIS: RURAL EXCEPTIONALISM

Through personal experience and the observations conducted through qualitative research, I began to form a picture of small towns as closely-knit, homogenous enclaves with high levels of social capital, community support and reciprocity, strong interest in the politics that immediately affected them, and relatively low interest in or awareness—perhaps even a sense of moral superiority over—the wider world. In Ankney’s terms, I predicted that rural residents would primarily be localists. Prior to evaluating the survey returns, I hypothesized that the results of my quantitative research would support the assumptions listed above; the term rural exceptionalism (adapted from the idea of American exceptionalism) was coined to describe the bonding social capital and resulting attitudes described above. I also predicted that Putnam’s thesis that social capital is necessary for democracy would be supported.
CASE STUDY: SALTSBURG

Saltsburg is an incorporated town in the southwest corner of Indiana County, Pennsylvania, and is closely associated with two neighboring townships, Conemaugh and Loyalhanna. The population of the borough, which was incorporated in 1830, has fluctuated between 911 and 990 residents over the past decade; the combined population for the borough and the two townships was 5,407 (Indiana County Commissioners). The rural nature of the community is reflected in the relative lack of urban infrastructure and institutions. Because the borough is landlocked, most of the land is developed or tied up; the lack of availability of property for new development is a problem. Many white-collar residents commute to work in surrounding areas, while those who work in or near town are generally employed in manufacturing or small business. The Breeze Corporation, manufacturer of hose clamps, is the area’s largest employer, providing jobs to 274 individuals. The 2000 Comprehensive Plan reported that no very wealthy individuals lived in Saltsburg.

With a strong heritage rooted in layers of industry and transportation—salt wells and the Pennsylvania Canal, coal mines and the railroad—Saltsburg has a documented and celebrated history and a feisty Historical Society (with a current membership of 10). After a lengthy battle with the borough for land, resources and development rights, historical activists secured a swath of land near the river that now marks the site of the former canal. Saltsburg Canal Park, the Rebecca B. Hadden Museum, and architectural preservation of historic buildings are the major components of the town’s appeal for tourism. A portion of the borough is a National Register Historic District. While a few restaurants and one associated river recreation business have supported and augmented
this mission, multiple informants suggested that the majority of the town’s business owners and general population are either indifferent or hostile to the museum, the devotion of land and resources, and regulations for historic buildings. While many residents stroll through the park on a nice day, the primary constituency for these efforts is outsiders, many from the greater Pittsburgh area. An amusing anecdote illustrating this problem occurred when a waitress at the Old Salt Restaurant said she had never heard of the town museum, which was curiously located just next door to her place of employment. The focus of concern for most community members, rather than historic preservation, seems to be infrastructure and economic development.

An informal census of Saltsburg’s community organizations reveals that churches are the most plentiful, and survey results support the observation of Historical Society President Ann Palmer and others that churches are the dominant institutions, with the Presbyterian Church situated as the most “socially prominent.” Other strong organizations include the Volunteer Fire Company, the American Legion, and the Lions’ Club.

The general level of community activity has dropped, asserts Mary Johnson, a founder of the museum. “This used to be such an active town; everybody was friendly and wanting to help. Today, it’s a real tough time getting young people in to support us; people don’t’ take the interest today that they did back then,” she said, referring to her childhood and the boom periods of Saltsburg that she has researched and documented. The annual Canal Days festival is an exception; attendance increases each year.
Ron Mancabelli, the town barber and incoming president of the Lions’ Club, agrees with Johnson. “It’s difficult to get young people involved; the community is not as strongly connected as it was 20 years ago, but I still think it has a good connection.”

Through the seven personal interviews with community leaders and business owners, a sketch of Saltsburg as an extremely traditional, change-resistant town emerged. Ann Palmer reports that a major reason for resistance to the development of historic tourism was the fear of strangers coming into the town. Bonding social capital is clearly at work within the established community. The troubles encountered by Eric Sutliff in seeking local support for his canoe and kayak business best exemplify the problem; as an outsider, he has been and continues to be met with suspicion and resentment. He even reports quasi-harassment by the borough police. “This is extremely an enclave; at the same time, it’s an absolutely beautiful town with so many charming attributes… enlightenment is not one of them. I would say the average person doesn’t know much about the rest of the world.” Despite the hostility he’s encountered, Sutliff has made some strong connections and persists in donating his time and resources to the community.

Mancabelli agreed that most residents are not very aware of global events, with the exception of America’s foreign policy, specifically the recent military actions and NAFTA. “In the shop, we talk about sports and politics; world politics comes up very little. County-wide issues are talked about, and school taxes are always a heated negative conversation. My clientele tends to be more liberal than I am; it’s the union influence,” he said, as Fox News played in the background. “As a whole group, I think the people are more interested in the local community and are not as politically active.”
The survey sample for Saltsburg, while quite small at 27, gives some indication of the turmoil created by the historic preservation versus development debate. All of the negative responses written for the "what satisfies you" question express hostility toward the imposition of the Historical Society's goals. Almost three-quarters of respondents said that the community was somewhat closely-knit and that people were interested in the well-being of others. (Please see Appendix D for Saltsburg frequencies.)
CASE STUDY: CLAYSBURG

Claysburg is an incorporated town in the southcentral section of Blair County, Pennsylvania. The Claysburg-Kimmel School District spans Greenfield Township and Kimmel Township; the combined population of the two is approximately 2,500 people, while the (source: Greenfield borough secretary). Because the town of Claysburg is not incorporated, there are no defined town limits, and the areas of greatest development are liberally interspersed with green space and abandoned lots; a few small fields still in agricultural use are situated in the middle of town.

Claysburg is very rural; the community (generally defined by the school district lines) stretches across many miles, most of which are sparsely populated. The ethnic heritage is primarily German, English and Swiss; as late as the mid-20th Century, some residents spoke the dialect known as Pennsylvania Dutch. Some white-collar residents commute to work in nearby Altoona and Hollidaysburg, while blue-collar workers find employment in one of Claysburg's many factories and distribution centers, (including the brand-new Sheetz distribution center) or work in similar facilities in nearby communities. A significant number of active farms are present, although agriculture is not the sole source of income for most farming families.

Claysburg's industrial heritage is rooted in the Brickyard—a very difficult entity to describe. Originally a single-facility brickmaking plant situated at the base of the mountain from which it drew raw materials, a second facility was opened down the road; both facilities evolved through a series of changes, and the old plant closed. The business now known as the Brickyard is part of one of the world's largest producers of precastibles—RHI Industries.
Unlike Saltsburg, Claysburg's history is the subject of more speculation than documentation. While both towns carry monikers based on natural resources, Saltsburg was clearly named for the salt wells, but Claysburg's name is subject of dispute. The dominant explanation seems to be that, early in the town's existence, statesman Henry Clay spent the night while passing through, and the town was named for him. Minority opinions, however, do persist. Claysburg's settlement dates to the early 1800s; the oldest legible tombstone in the Union Cemetery marks a German immigrant who died in the 1840s.

The township supervisors who govern the community take a very passive approach; the only major battle in recent years was the establishment of water and sewer lines. Robert Gordon, president of the three-member board, said that attendance at township meetings is quite low, except when something controversial is proposed. School district superintendent James O'Harrow reports similar tendencies at school board meetings.

Claysburg's major campaign centers around the attraction of business to the area, and recent development indicates success. The vast majority of new jobs created in the last decade were blue-collar positions; the new companies generally imported management from other plants. The mottos "We Work Harder" and "A Small Town in a Big Way" usually greet incoming drivers, although the sign has been blown over for most of this year. "You want good people who are willing to work, to do a good job? Come to Claysburg," said Gordon proudly. New businesses and old ones who renovate or expand their facilities are routinely granted LERTAs, a type of tax abatement, by the township and the school board.
The community park is a success story that did not entail a major conflict like that encountered in Saltsburg. Funded by community donations and grants, the new, centrally-located facility features a picnic area, jogging track, softball field, and will soon have a gazebo. Claysburg Community Days are held each August at the park; a community worship service that is meant to bring all denominations together is attended by most congregations, but is ignored each year by the town's largest church, the Church of God, a fundamentalist-evangelical organization based in the South.

An informal census of Claysburg's community organizations reveals, like Saltsburg, that churches are the most plentiful. There are no fraternal organizations and only one civic group (the Rotary Club); the volunteer fire company is extremely active, and the American Legion is an aging and quiet community institution. The Claysburg Communities that Care (CTC) organization, started in the 1990s, is a major player oriented toward creating a better family environment; the group has successfully secured federal and state grants for drug use prevention, park construction, an Americorps worker, and general community-building activities. Part of its mission, as expressed by O'Harrow and high school guidance counselor Nancy Musselman, both active participants, is to mobilize and connect up the existing community organizations; rather than duplicate services, CTC seeks to bring community fragments together. Little resentment or hostility is reported in response to the community-building activities, likely because they are not perceived as taking resources away from other efforts or drawing outsiders into the community (as is the case in Saltsburg).

The community newsletter editor, Jeanne Mowry, is a new resident who has encountered some skepticism to changes, but says that Claysburg is generally very
supportive and active. She praised the community theater group, CTC, and various school-related parents’ booster groups. “This is a very tightly-knit community; everyone wants to know what everyone else is doing, and that’s why our newsletter is of interest. As an outsider looking in, I would call Claysburg an enclave. While some people are aware of the wider world, many don’t go out of the county and think that everything that affects their lives happens here.” As in Saltsburg, it appears that Claysburg is strong on bonding social capital and low on connections with the wider world.

The survey sample for Claysburg is not very different from that of Saltsburg, but there is greater indication of a general satisfaction with the community. The only negative comment registered was the blunt “It is dead;” clearly this resident is unsatisfied with the pastoral way of life. Almost three-quarters of respondents said that the community was somewhat closely-knit and that people were interested in the well-being of others; because social desirability makes an outright negative response unlikely, the selection of the moderate-positive variable may actually indicate residents’ qualms. The cluster of community and school-related groups was ranked as having the highest participation levels, with churches a close second. Claysburgers reported levels of close-knittedness and interest in the well-being of others comparable with that of Saltsburg. (Please see Appendix E for Claysburg frequencies.)
RECOMMENDATIONS

The strong presence of bonding social capital is a blessing and a curse; while the residents of these towns generally have strong feelings of reciprocity and connectedness, they are hesitant to change and don't actively seek input from the wider world. An increased presence for organizations like the Rotary Club, which bonds the community while bridging to other cultures (even sponsoring foreign exchange students), would do well to open these towns to more cosmopolitan awareness. For Saltsburg, it is clear that consensus-building organizations are needed; an equivalent of the Communities that Care organization would help bring factions together and assimilate new residents in a more supportive way. For Claysburg, some systematic effort to document local history would be an excellent source of community pride; the upcoming bicentennial celebration might provide a good opportunity.

Economically, recommendations for these communities differ based on their geographic possibilities. Saltsburg needs greater efforts aimed at renovating and building within the borough limits; this would improve the appearance of the town and provide an increased tax base in the long term. Claysburg, while successful at bringing in employers, might do well to court more white-collar jobs; the present dearth of opportunities for professionals in the community means more hours are spent commuting and more college-educated youth are forced to outmigrate to find jobs.
SURVEY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

A six-sided, 37-question survey was created to assess the demographics, levels of community involvement, social habits, attitudes, and political activity of Saltsburg and Claysburg residents (see Appendix A). Two hundred households in each community (four hundred total) were selected to receive the survey. Anonymity was assured to respondents. Tracking numbers were included on each survey in case of follow-up mailings; there was no second mailing, and the tracking numbers have not been checked against the original subject list.

The subject pool was chosen through random selection; every tenth alphabetically-listed household from each community was selected using the Fall 2002 telephone books. A dilemma arose concerning the definition of community; differing overlaps for each community in zip codes, telephone exchanges, school districts and township lines made it difficult to definitively isolate appropriate subjects. For Saltsburg, eligible households were determined by their zip code as part of the Saltsburg 15681 area. Because of the greater geographical spread of the community of Claysburg, it was more appropriate to use the 239 telephone exchange for selecting a subject pool. The majority of selected households carried the Claysburg 16625 zip code, while a minority carried one of two bordering zip codes (Imler and East Freedom). Each of these zip code areas is split between the Claysburg-Kimmel school district and neighboring districts; the Claysburg district generally corresponds with the 239 exchange area.

To help alleviate any sampling error caused by these selection methods, the instructions with the survey clearly and repeatedly stated that a household that did not consider itself a part of the community in question should not respond. It should be noted
that several surveys were returned with hand-written notes stating that the members of
the household did not consider themselves part of the specified community, indicating
that the self-selection was successful.

The surveys were mailed with postage-paid reply envelopes from the Robert E.
Cook Honors College at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania during the second week
of January 2003. Respondents were given approximately three weeks from the mailing
date to return the survey. The cover page contained the survey title, investigator’s name,
and a graphic; the reverse contained instructions for the respondent and the informed
consent information required by IUP internal review board protocol. The instructions
stated that the adult with the next upcoming birthday should fill out the survey; this was
an attempt to randomize the respondent selection within the household. Contact
information for the investigator and the thesis director was also provided.
SURVEY RESPONSE RATE AND OTHER CONCERNS

Sixty-two surveys were returned from the two communities. Claysburg returned 35, or 17.5%; Saltsburg returned 27, or 13.5%. While this overall 15.5% response rate is almost exactly the textbook rate for mailed surveys, it was lower than expected; I had relied on my name recognition (having one of Claysburg's earliest and most common surnames) and Saltsburgers' esteem for nearby IUP to boost response rates in each community.

The low response rate may be attributed to several factors. First, telephone lists are somewhat unreliable because they are often not updated when residents die or move from the area. In Claysburg, several initially-selected respondents were discarded because my father was able to identify the individuals as deceased. This was not possible for Saltsburg. The portion of selected households with deceased or missing occupants may have been a major factor in the low response rate. Interestingly, two surveys were returned, unmarked, with notes saying that so-and-so was dead (why the person who returned the survey didn't answer it him- or herself is a puzzle.) In addition, many of the addresses selected were not updated to reflect recent road naming for 911 purposes, and some carried no address at all—only a town and zip code. While rural post offices generally deliver such mail, some envelopes may have been lost, misdelivered or discarded. Second, because the outer envelope had a return address from the Honors College at IUP, many residents may have discarded the mailing unopened because they expected no correspondence from a university and assumed it was junk mail. Third, if the thesis of rural exceptionalism is accepted, it would be expected that a greater number of rural residents would be unwilling to respond to unsolicited mail because of a high
valuation of privacy and a relative lack of interest in the outside world. Fourth, the length of the survey probably discouraged many who opened it from completing it.

The gender imbalance of respondents was a major concern; 40 were male and 22 were female, meaning almost two-thirds (64.5%) of respondents were male. This may be attributed to the fact that a majority of households were listed under the male’s name, and the surveys were addressed to the name or names listed in the phone book. If men who opened the mailing did not read the instructions, they would have been likely to simply fill out the survey rather than give it to the adult member of the household with the next birthday. In addition, one might infer that rural communities are more patriarchal than the national norm. It is unusual and worth noting the gender inequity of the respondents, because traditionally, response rates among women are higher than among men, and the general population contains more women than men.

Another problem noted among the returned surveys was the tendency of respondents to skip questions or whole pages, or to circle more than one response category for a question. In the creation of social capital and citizenship indices, almost one-quarter of respondents were excluded because they failed to answer one or more of the applicable questions. Although it is preferred that questions be skipped rather than answered randomly, this created an even worse validity problem on top of the already-low response rate. The open-ended questions in which respondents were asked to name the organizations to which they belonged and provide comments about the community were unanswered by more than half of respondents and one-third of respondents, respectively. The question assessing which level of politics interests respondents the most created a massive problem; a significant minority of respondents chose to circle
multiple response categories. It is also apparent that some respondents were confused about certain questions; the impossibility, for instance, of a woman who reported spending a combined 24 hours each day consuming media and spending time with her family very likely missed the directive to omit time spent watching television with the family from the latter calculation.

A final concern is a common one: social desirability. Cognitive dissonance (the friction between one’s reality and what one wishes to do or be) causes many people to respond to survey questions with less than honest answers. Many of the questions in this survey are susceptible to this phenomenon because of their inherently social nature.

These issues and problems related to response rate and survey design have been noted and will provide good experience for the future design and implementation of other surveys.
SURVEY DATA ANALYSIS

Using the combined data set with all respondents from both communities, a broad picture of these rural towns emerged. Basic frequencies were run for all variables, excepting open-ended response questions, which were recoded into new variables with specified response categories. Because of the low number of respondents, many questions with high numbers of response categories were recoded so that results could be more easily interpreted and so that the output charts would provide a more compelling picture of the sample. Finally, several variables were computed into social capital and citizenship indices and crosstabs were run.

Please refer to Appendix B, Frequencies: Combined Data Set for Both Communities, for full statistics and charts for each frequency. Page numbers within Appendix B are listed in parentheses next to the statistics cited below for easy reference.

Demographics. The respondents are 64.5% male; the mean age is 50.7 and the median age is 49.5. Respondent ages ranged from 25 to 83 (pp 43-44) The median for yearly total family income was $40,000 to $49,000; 20% of respondents reported yearly household incomes lower than $20,000, while about 22% reported household incomes between $20,000 and $40,000. (pp 44-46) Regarding length of residency, a full 71% of respondents have lived in the community for 21 years or longer; 13% lived there between one and two decades, while new residents (ten years or fewer) comprise 16% of the sample. The modal category for the original residency question is the first: Those who've lived in the community since early childhood. (pp 41-42)
Just over half (50.8%) of respondents have no formal education beyond high school; 8.2% of respondents did not earn a high school diploma. Fewer than one-third of respondents (29.6%) earned a four-year degree; among those, 9.9% attended at least some graduate school. About 10% of respondents chose to earn an associate's, technical, or 2-year degree, and another 10% were college dropouts. In sum, about two-thirds of respondents earned less than a 4-year bachelor's degree. (pp 46-48)

Based on the open-ended occupation question, responses were recoded into three categories: blue-collar, white-collar, and non-employed. The latter category includes housewives, retirees, handicapped and unemployed respondents. (Two respondents who simply designated themselves as self-employed were listed as system-missing because the nature of their work could not be determined.) Thirty percent of respondents are employed in white-collar positions, with the remaining seventy percent split evenly between blue-collar jobs and non-employment. Most of the non-employed respondents are retired. (pp 48-49)

About three-quarters (74.2%) of respondents are married, for the first time or more. Among the remaining quarter, about ten percent have never been married, about five percent are widowed, and about eleven percent are currently divorced. The median number of children for respondents is two; the largest family contained ten children. When recoded, we see that the majority (54.2%) have one or two children, while 18.6% have no children and 27.1% have three or more children. (pp 53-56)

In summary, the average respondent is a married, fifty-year-old, blue-collar male with a high school diploma and two children who has lived in the community for most of his life and enjoys a combined household income in the $40 thousands.
Community Involvement and Social Habits. About one-third of respondents belong to no community organizations (including churches, unions, civic and community groups and others); the remainder is split between members of one or two organizations (43.3%), members of three or four (20%) and super-joiners who belong to four or more organizations (5%). Among the 28 respondents who specified the organizations to which they belong, 21 belong to churches; 23 belong to various community, school-related, or voluntary groups; six belong to civic or fraternal organizations; five belong to unions or professional groups; and six belong to recreational groups. More than a third of respondents devote zero hours each week to community groups; the mean number of hours is just over 2 per week. (The most active community member reported devoting twenty hours each week). (pp 1-5)

Conversely, involvement in national or world organizations is significantly lower. Twenty-five respondents were involved in none, while another 25 were involved in one or two, leaving the remaining 10 respondents as members of three or more such organizations. Most tellingly, two-thirds of respondents devoted no hours each week to these organizations; the mean number of hours spent per week was .6. Most respondents who listed national or world organization memberships named national organizations of which they belonged to the local chapter or “donation-only” groups such as the various medical or animal-welfare causes. (pp 5-6)

Respondents were also asked to account for various other activities in which they spent time. The mean number of hours each day spent consuming informational media was reported as 2.9. (I believe, however, many respondents misunderstood this question and listed hours spent on any media or television source, including purely entertainment...
The mean number of hours spent with family, excluding hours watching television, was 3.9. Combining these two variables, it seems that the mean number of "home hours" spent consuming media and enjoying family life was 6.8 per day. Each day, respondents reported spending an average of 2.34 hours in conversation with friends and co-workers. (pp 11-17)

The propensity of respondents to give financially was respectable; only 5.2% of respondents donated no money in the past year. About three-quarters gave 10% and under of their income, while the remaining 17.2% of altruistic individuals gave more than 10% of their yearly income to good causes. The median response was category four, meaning that the average respondent gave up between one and five percent of his or her household income. (34-36)

In summary, the average respondent spent 19.7 hours weekly engaged in community, national or world organizations or conversing with friends and colleagues, compared with 47.6 hours weekly spent with the family or consuming media. Extra-family help hours clocked in at an average of 1.1 per week, while weekly home hours were a much higher 47.6. (pp 11-17 and 34-38)

Personal Attitudes. Respondents were asked a series of questions about their attitudes about their lives and their communities. The social desirability factor probably weighed heavily in some of these questions, but the overwhelmingly positive responses would seem to support the presence of high social capital in these communities. About 90% of respondents reported that their community is very or somewhat closely-knit; a full 85.2% were very or somewhat satisfied with their community. A full 94.7% reported that people were very or somewhat interested in the well-being of others in their
community, supporting the notion that norms of reciprocity and trust are particularly high in small towns. When asked if the lot in life of the average person in their community was better or worse than people around the country, almost two-thirds reported that it was about the same; 16.1% said it was worse, and 14.5% said it was better. (pp 6-11)

Exactly one-third of respondents felt that government and schools had the greatest impact on their community. 18.3% said that business had the most impact; 8.3% selected community organizations and 6.7% selected average citizens. A full 30% reported that all the listed groups had about the same level of impact. More than two-thirds of respondents agreed strongly or somewhat that average citizens could influence public decisions in their community. 80.3% reported that they contributed to making the community a good place to live, while 10.4% said they did not. (pp 28-31)

Finally, respondents’ attitudes about the community were gauged with an open-ended question, “What satisfies you about your community?” Responses were recoded into one of five groupings, and up to three responses were coded for each respondent; respondents who made repeated statements that fell into the same category were listed multiple times for each category. Eighteen respondents did not answer this question. Among the 91 positive statements made, 25 fell into the category for statements expressing appreciation for the quiet, safe, and isolated nature of the community, while 35 positive statements were made about the friendliness and familiarity of the people and 11 responses praised the small size of the town; this valuation of the community as enclave and social network clearly and strongly supports the rural exceptionalism thesis. Another 10 statements cited various community organizations, institutions and businesses. Finally, just 10 positive statements cited other assets of the community, such
as natural features, cost of living and proximity to cities. Just a few negative responses were charted. (pp 56-59)

**Political Attitudes and Activity.** More than three-quarters (77.4%) of respondents are registered to vote. The number one affiliation is Democrat, with 41% of respondents citing a preference for that party; 39.3% self-identified as Republicans, while 19.7% were listed as independent, none, or unsure. Despite the higher preference for the Democratic party, the modal category for political ideology was conservative at 30.6%, with moderates comprising 25.8% of the sample and liberals comprising just 17.7% of respondents. We can infer from this data that the majority of Democrats in these communities are moderate or conservative in leaning. Interestingly, 25.8% of respondents were unable to place themselves in one of the three categories. (pp 17-20 and 52-53)

Voting frequency among respondents was high; 52.5% said they voted in all of the past four November elections, while 36.7% claimed to have voted in the past four spring primaries. These numbers are probably somewhat inflated by social desirability, but the difference between reported voting in fall and spring reveal some level of honesty. While 90.3% of respondents reported believing that government had very much or some impact on their lives, only 22.4% said they would be able to name all or most of the elected officials who represent them. (pp 20-28)

Finally, respondents were asked which level of politics most interested them between world, national, state and local events. More than half reported they were all of equal interest, and many other respondents broke the mold to circle two or more response categories. Because of these issues, the question was recoded into four separate
variables, each measuring how many respondents indicated interest in each of the four levels of politics. National politics ranked first, with 42 of respondents reporting interest. Surprisingly, world politics ranked next highest, with 40 respondents reporting interest. Local and state politics came in second and third with 39 and 38 respondents each, respectively. The numbers are extremely close for each level, which provides inconclusive results for the hypothesis that rural residents are more interested in local and state political affairs. The unexpectedly strong showing for world politics, however, can be attributed to the impending war that dominated news coverage at the time the survey was administered. (pp 22-25)

In summary, the typical respondent is a moderate or conservative Democrat interested in all levels of politics who believes government is powerful, is unable to name most of his or her elected officials, and votes frequently in fall elections and semi-frequently in primaries.

Social Capital and Citizenship Indices. A social capital index was created based on the respondent's experience within the community; the variables measuring how closely-knit the community is, whether people in the community are interested in the well-being of others and the general satisfaction level were computed to create a raw social capital index to measure the perceived levels of social capital. The raw index was recoded into high, moderate, and low levels of social capital. The same was done for citizenship levels using the variables measuring fall and spring voting records and the ability to name elected officials. For the social capital index, among the 53 valid cases, the modal category was moderate, with 71.7% registering as moderate, 20.8% ranking as
high and just 7.5% ranking as low. Citizenship was more evenly distributed, with 44.4% of the 54 valid cases ranking high, 25.9% ranking moderate, and 29.6% ranking low.

Crosstabs were run with social capital as the independent variable, and the results provide a tentative support for the thesis that social capital levels influence democratic participation. The major problem with interpreting this data is the low statistical validity (approximate significance at .464) caused by the small number of valid cases; only 47 respondents (75.8% of total respondents) were kind enough to answer all six questions used in computing the indices. While five or more cases per cell is the expected norm, six of the nine cells contained fewer than five. Still, inferences can be drawn from the distribution of cases across the nine cells. Most glaringly, there are no cases of low social capital and high citizenship, and there are only three cases of low citizenship and high social capital. The extreme cases—high on both ends, and low on both ends—have low frequency, with four and two, respectively. The modal cell is that of high citizenship and moderate social capital. Among those reporting experiencing moderate levels of social capital, exactly half have high citizenship, while 23.5% have moderate citizenship and 26.5% have low citizenship. The clustering of high or moderate social capital experiences with high or moderate citizenship levels seem to indicate that while experiencing social capital often will (but may not always) boost citizenship, some presence of social capital is necessary for a high level of citizenship. (pp 59-63; please see Appendix C for Crosstabs.)
RESULTS

The idea of rural exceptionalism was strongly supported by the qualitative research described in the case studies and by the open-ended survey question regarding what features of the community were most satisfactory. The statistical data offered some additional support and, more importantly, posed no major challenges to rural exceptionalism, with the exception of the strong showing of interest for world politics. As mentioned, this can be attributed to the contemporary dominance of American foreign policy and military in the news. Tentative support for Putnam’s posited relationship between social capital and citizenship was observed in the indices created to gauge these quantities, although the appropriateness of the questions matched to form the social capital index need further examination.

In summary, rural exceptionalism, or the tendency of small-town residents to form and value a high-social-capital, homogenous and closely-bonded community while having distrust or disinterest in the wider world—a sense of exceptionalism from its problems—is generally supported by the findings of this project, and should be further tested and developed in later research.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


*Web resources:*
The Rural Sociological Society: [www.ruralsociology.org](http://www.ruralsociology.org)
The Center for Rural Pennsylvania: [www.ruralpa.org](http://www.ruralpa.org)
Saltsburg Borough: [www.saltsburg.org](http://www.saltsburg.org)
Claysburg-Kimmel School District: [http://cksd.k12.pa.us/](http://cksd.k12.pa.us/)