



Perceptions of Rural America:

National State Legislator Survey

When state legislators consider the problems facing rural America and potential solutions, their primary concern is to create opportunities for people to stay in rural areas. The ongoing economic hardships facing rural areas and the challenges to reviving the agricultural economy have meant that legislators focus the bulk of their rural policy agenda on fostering economic development. At the moment, legislative initiatives tend to rely on market solutions such as providing tax breaks or incentives to attract businesses to rural areas and they are less likely to promote solutions that invest directly in individuals.

Most striking is that despite acknowledging the problem of the decline of the family farm, legislators report in the survey that they have not spent a great deal of time working to save the family farm nor do they see the larger solution to the economic woes of rural America rooted in agriculture or farming.

Half of all state legislators say they personally deal with rural issues frequently, as do their legislatures. While state legislators tend to believe that rural issues take lower priority than urban issues, there is great awareness of the challenges facing rural America among rural, suburban and urban legislators alike. Legislators cite a great deal of policy innovation at the state level even though they diverge in their views about which entity of government should bear primary responsibility for rural problems.

Most legislators would like to see more federal investment in rural areas, but they view state and local governments as primarily responsible for offering solutions to rural problems, especially in the area of economic development and education. Legislators are at the forefront of innovative economic development policies such as the development of rural empowerment zones, grants and loans for job training programs, and the spread of technology and access to broadband.

These results are based on a unique national study of state legislators. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, a public opinion research firm, conducted a nationally representative survey of state legislators on rural issues. A survey was mailed to 5000 legislators from a total population of 7000 legislators with additional surveys mailed to legislators in states with significant rural populations. In response to two mailings and reminder notices, 1030 surveys were completed, yielding a response rate of better than 20 percent. Respondents were also given the option of completing the survey over the Internet, an option selected by 41 respondents. The data were weighted to represent the regional distribution of the national population, rather than the size of individual legislatures.

The Priority of Rural Issues in State Legislatures


Rural issues occupy a significant amount of legislators' time, despite the fact that a majority says that rural issues often take a back seat to urban and suburban issues. Half of all state legislators say they personally and their state legislatures deal with rural issues frequently, while half say they deal with rural issues only occasionally, sometimes or never.

Although half of legislators perceive that they personally and collectively deal with rural issues frequently, only 8 percent of legislators say that rural issues are given higher priority than suburban or urban issues; 14 percent say suburban issues are given a higher priority, 39 percent say urban issues are given a higher priority and 36 percent say they all areas are given the same level of priority. Both rural and suburban legislators believe that urban issues take priority over rural and suburban issues, while urban legislators are likely to think that all areas take equal priority.

Priority of Rural Issues				
<i>(Percent Responding)</i>				
	Total	District Type		
		Rural	Suburban	Urban
Rural Issues	8	4	10	13
Suburban Issues	14	17	12	15
Urban Issues	39	44	41	23
All same	36	31	35	45

Nearly half of state legislators feel that state (35 percent) and local (11 percent) governments are primarily responsible for providing solutions to rural problems, while one-quarter believe the federal government is most responsible. At the same time, a majority (57 percent) would like more federal spending on rural programs, compared to only 7 percent who want less federal spending. Rural legislators are both most likely to believe the federal government should spend more money on rural programs and most likely to believe state government is primarily responsible for providing solutions.

Challenges and Solutions to Rural Problems

 Legislators are unified in their belief that rural America’s challenges are primarily economic and they understand that there are currently few economic opportunities for rural citizens. When asked about the biggest problems facing rural America, legislators cite primarily economic issues, such as the lack of opportunities for young people (38 percent), the decline of family farm (31 percent), and the persistence of low wage jobs (28 percent). These economic concerns feed into legislators’ strong belief that people who live in rural areas have fewer opportunities (86 percent) than those who live in cities and suburbs.

Most Important Problem in Rural Areas*(Percent responding)*

Lack of opportunity for young people	38
The decline of the family farm	31
Access to healthcare	28
Low wage jobs	28
Quality of education	18
Over development and sprawl	14
Access to technology	8
Access to transportation	8
The breakup of the family	6
The environment	5
Drug abuse	2
Access to housing	2

Despite this overwhelming belief that the problems facing rural America are economic, many fewer state legislators report that their legislative bodies have done a great deal of work on the specific economic issues they mentioned. In fact, when asked in what areas legislatures have done a great deal or some work on rural issues, most legislators cite their work on education (84 percent), the environment (70 percent) and technology (69 percent) – while low wage jobs (43 percent), opportunities for young people (33 percent) and the decline of the family farm (33 percent) are at the bottom of the list.

Biggest Problem Facing Rural Areas and Work Done on Them

(Percent responding)

	Biggest Problem	Great Deal/ Some Work
Lack of opportunity for young people	38	33
The decline of the family farm	31	33
Access to healthcare	28	64
Low wage jobs	28	43
Quality of education	18	84
Over development and sprawl	14	41
Access to technology	8	69
Access to transportation	8	59
The breakup of the family	6	17
The environment	5	70
Drug abuse	2	48
Access to housing	2	43

This tension between how legislators prioritize rural problems, and how much work legislatures work on these problems, may be rooted in a number of dynamics. Legislators may be attempting to address large economic issues, at least in part, by focusing more narrowly on initiatives like increasing access to broadband and improving educational opportunities. Second, state legislators are consumed with their states' budget woes. Half of legislators say that balancing the budget is their single highest priority for the next session. If taxes are included in the broader budget debate, 60 percent of legislators say fiscal issues are the highest priority for their legislature.

Most Important Issues

(Percent Responding)

Balancing the state budget	49
Education	44
The economy	39
Health care	30
State government spending	12
State taxes	11
Traffic	5
Moral decline	3
Overdevelopment	2
The environment	2
Retirement security	1

The Next Step: Creating Economic Opportunities in Rural Areas

The tension between the high importance that state legislators attribute to creating economic opportunities in rural areas and the limited amount of work their legislative bodies have done in this area manifests itself in a future agenda centered on spurring economic development in rural areas and creating opportunities for young people to stay there and succeed.

As mentioned earlier, the areas where state legislators have done the most work in rural areas focus on education, access to technology and health care, and the environment. To the extent that they have worked on economic development, the efforts taken tend to rely on market solutions such as tax incentives, rather than measures that require large spending, are likely a result, in part, of the tight budget environment. While state legislators do not report their legislatures doing a great deal of work creating opportunities for young people in rural areas, when asked about the most significant policies for rural America passed in the last five years, nearly half cite economic or monetary legislation, which means cutting taxes (11 percent) or deregulation (8 percent) for many. For others it means more investment in infrastructure (7 percent) or economic development (7 percent).

When legislators think about *future* steps to help rural areas and policy *innovations* to foster rural economic development, they focus on both market-based incentives to economic development and investment in people. As major policy innovations, they cite policies to attract businesses such as enterprise and renaissance zones, rural economic action plans (REAPs), and other business incentives, but when thinking about future policies to help rural areas, they also include job training and education and other investments to create opportunities for people to succeed. Despite partisan differences among rural legislators, overall, they were more likely than non-rural legislators to propose policies that involved a monetary investment in rural areas.

Conclusion

This study is part of a larger research program sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation on the state of rural America.¹ We find that at every level of government, federal and local, and among individuals, there is consensus about what ails rural America and the need to improve economic opportunities in rural areas. As this study shows, making progress is challenging as legislators face budgetary constraints and philosophical differences in their approach to solving problems. Despite these obstacles, state legislators are at the forefront of innovation and experimentation in developing economic opportunities in rural areas, whether that means trying to advance access to broadband or providing loans for job training. Though not likely to invest in wide reaching government programs, rural and non-rural legislators are committed to improving opportunities for residents in rural areas in their states even as they move into this new budget environment.

Most Innovative Policy to Help Rural Areas

(Percent Responding)

Economy	29	Taxes	7
Economic development	14	Education	5
Enterprise zones	5	Growth	4
Economic issues, general	5	Environmental	2
Job growth	3	Health Care	2
Business incentives	1	Other	17
Rural Economic Action Plan	1	Tobacco settlement	3
Infrastructure	11	Housing	1
Transportation	3	Water related	1
Internet	3	Other issues	12
Technology	3		
Infrastructure, general	3		
Farm Related	10		
Farm issues, general	4		
Farm preservation	3		
Ethanol/Biodiese	12		
Farm loans	1		

¹ See *Perceptions of Rural America*, and *Perceptions of Rural America: Congressional Perspectives*, www.wkcf.org.

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 social currents, and 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 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.



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