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WEBINAR

ON THE FRONT PORCH WITH TONY PIPA AND BRENT ORRELL: A CONVERSATION WITH ELIZABETH CURRID-HALKETT ABOUT 'THE OVERLOOKED AMERICANS'

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INTRODUCTION:

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CONVERSATION:

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PIPA: Come everyone, to the fourth in our series of Front Porch Conversations, co-sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution, where my co-host, Brent Orrell and I engage in conversation with authors of recent research on Rural America. And, and we explore its implications for public policy and really for the well-being of our country. Our guest today is Elizabeth Currid-Halkett. The author of "The Overlooked Americans: The Resilience of Our Rural Towns and What It Means for Our Country," which was published last summer. But before I kick off today's conversation, just want to go over a few housekeeping notes. As I mentioned, this is the fourth in the series we're calling, On The Front Porch. You can find links to the recordings of our other conversations on the website The Reimagining Rural Policy Initiative that I lead here at the Center for Sustainable Development at Brookings.

And you should save the date now for our next front porch conversation. That'll be with Steve Conn on May the 3rd, 1 p.m. He's the author of, "Lives of the Land: Seeing Rural America for What It Is and What It Isn't." That'll be hosted in person and online, here at Brookings. And we're also in the midst of nailing down dates for two additional conversations to follow. That one that will, where we'll get to discuss the opioid crisis and its implications. Another that'll give us a historical perspective on the pros and cons of place based, federal policy. Just to remind you, this series is intended to give us a chance to examine the long term demographic, economic, technological, and social factors that have influenced Rural America and then to focus on the policy implications, which I personally think is extremely important given all the attention that we're likely to experience on rural politics throughout this election season.

And I'm so pleased to be joined, as usual, on today's virtual front porch by my partner in this series, Brent Orrell, who's a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. He's an expert on workforce development and job training. Looking at work as a vocation as well as criminal justice reform. I really respect Brett's long history of public service, both in the legislative and executive branches. And, he also hosts a podcast called Hardly Working, which I highly recommend, which I highly recommend as a complement to my own podcast, Reimagine Rural. So go out and find both of those and, and make sure that, you're taking advantage of those, in your listening time.

And we're both delighted to be joined by our guest today, Elizabeth Currid-Halkett, who holds the James Irvine chair in urban and regional planning and is a professor of public policy at the Private School at the University of Southern California. In 2022, she was appointed the Kluge chair in modern culture at the Library of Congress, and the following year received a Guggenheim Fellowship, and her research focuses on the arts and culture, the American consumer economy and the role of culture in geographic and class divides. And I'm personally really excited about this, Elizabeth and I first crossed paths last summer, when, I had outreach from, an outlet that wanted to have a conversation about her book and wanted me to host that book chat. I couldn't do it.

But in the midst of looking into be able to do it, I learned that she was from Danville, or grew up, had some formative years in Danville, Pennsylvania. And believe it or not, Danville, Pennsylvania is in northeastern and, northeastern central Pennsylvania, ten minutes around, from the town that I grew up in Elysburg, Pennsylvania. So we won't get into the Danville Ironmen versus the Southern Columbia Tigers. Except to say that the Tigers now have a bunch of state titles in a row. But we'll leave it at that. But it is great to, to be in conversation with someone who, at least is a neighbor or neighbor. Lee. In my, in in my regard. So if you're joining us on the front porch, you know that we conduct these as informal but well informed conversations.

And after a discussion amongst ourselves about the book, we're going to take, questions from the audience. So if you're online, you can pose a question to events@brookings.edu, or you can use the social media formerly known as Twitter. Use the handle at Brookings Global and, use the hashtag on the front porch. So let's get into this conversation. And Elizabeth. We generally just start off. By asking, you know, what was your motivation for writing this book? What was really the impulse. And if you can give us a sense of, both as you then followed through on that. What are some of the main takeaways? And that'll give us a chance to then dig deeper into, some of those takeaways. But why this book and why now?

CURRID-HALKETT: Well, first of all, thank you, Tony, and thank you, Brian. I, we've talked quite a few times before and I always enjoyed our conversation. So it's a real honor to be with you today. So I grew up, as Tony, pointed out, in a small town in northeast Pennsylvania. Population between 4 and

5000. I loved my time there. I still go back and visit and. I, you know, it's where I lived 18, not quite 18 years of my life. I was born in West Virginia, actually, and I lived a few years in Pittsburgh. And then I went to Danville. And, you know, at some point I go to college where I went, I went to Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh, and then I went to graduate school in New York. And then I got a job at USC in Los Angeles. And so a lot of my adult life has been in cities. Where in 2016, when Trump won the white House, the aftermath in the media that I consume and in my social circles was just like, what's going on? You know, rural America is so angry at this country. They voted for Trump because they're mad. They're discontented.

That was the media I was consuming us what everyone was saying. And my lived experience just wasn't that. I knew people in small town America, and I knew people who voted for Trump, and I didn't get any sense of rage or vitriol or revenge in their votes at all. Now that's just my experience. You can't write a whole, you know, book based on your experience. I'm not a I don't write memoirs. I write social science. So I decided to study this. And so my initial exploration was data. And I thought to myself, well, if rural America is really angry at the world, the data is going to resoundingly show this. And, and, and oh, plenty of folks have pointed out that we have uneven economic development in rural America, so we can spend some time on that. But what I found was that wasn't the case for a vast majority of rural America.

A lot of rural America is doing really, really well. And so that allowed me kind of gave me permission to say, okay, so we've got a story here, which is not simply that rural America is in decline, that there's more going on to the story. In the story. So then what I did was I interviewed dozens and dozens of rural Americans, along with urban Americans, to get a sense of different viewpoints. And, you know, at the time, initially, I was going to travel around, you know, in a car, in an RV, take my family. And then the pandemic hit. So that wasn't possible. And so what I did instead is got numbers, got emails. Did you know, social scientist researchers called the snowballing effect. So you talk to someone, you say, can you give me a few names? You reach out to those folks, some of them right back, some of them don't. Long story short is I talked to lots and lots and lots of rural Americans, from California to Missouri to Tennessee to Pennsylvania to West Virginia to Kentucky.

And I found that the story, my hunch about rural America, which was that, hey, may or may not have voted for Trump, but they weren't on some sort of vendetta was, in my experience, true. They weren't. They were just living their lives like everyone else. And so that's the story I wanted to tell. And it was the story that was backed up by data, both qualitative and quantitative.

PIPA: So let's just start with the first part of that that you said, you know, you looked at the data of how rural America was doing and, even some of our, even some of the people tuning in today as, as, they submitted questions in advance. They tuned in for a conversation that Brent and I had with Cathy Eaton and Tim Nelson, who recently, put out a book called The Injustice of Place. And their analysis, when they were looking at areas of deep disadvantage, found that, a lot of that was in rural America. So how does that comport? Tell us a little bit when you say rural America is doing pretty well. Tell us what you mean by that. Like, along what kind of lines, what kind of indicators where you're looking at. And how does that comport with what? Cathy and Tim were talking. What? We were talking about them, which is that there are some areas where that are predominantly rural, that aren't doing very well.

CURRID-HALKETT: So first of all, that's a great question. I don't disagree with their data at all. I've seen their map of America. And you know, my research shows this to my data, shows this to the South is in real trouble. In fact, in my research, if you remove the South's data, the poverty levels between rural and urban American are exactly the same. So a lot of the disadvantage we see in rural America is very geographically specific and very regionally specific. And so the, the, the, the overall picture of rural America is that it's thriving. And you can look at this through a few different lenses. You can look at it through homeownership median income. You can look at it through unemployment. You can look at it through industry. That doesn't mean and I want to make sure this this is really, really important. And I as a policy professor and as someone who studies economic development, I think this is we would do a disservice to have any broad brush stroke policy solution for rural America.

And I think for so long, we call it rural America, like rural America in the Midwest or the interior Northwest or New England is wildly different than the rural America of Appalachia or the South. And so Cathy and Tim are not wrong at all. I mean, their work is really succinct here. But what it what it

suggests, along with what I see in my work, is that if we're going to make interventions, those interventions should be targeted rather than a policy for rural America. I mean, Iowa doesn't need our help, you know, nor does Wyoming. I mean, these are places where people are really thriving. And, and that's not the same thing as whether you if you live in Alabama. Mississippi.

PIPA: Brent, come into this conversation. What is this bringing up for you just in terms of, where rural America is right now?

ORRELL: Yeah, I mean, I, I'm also perplexed by those. One of the things that, that we talked about with Cathy in town was that rural America has the most advantaged and the most disadvantaged counties or places in the country. And I'm really interested in what distinguishes the thriving parts from the parts that are not thriving, beyond the geography that you just pointed to. The South, I'd like you to say more about why the South is in, what makes you say the South is in such trouble? And then I'd like if you've got any reflections on. The kinds of factors or that mediate well-being versus not, across rural America.

CURRID-HALKETT: So let me try to. It's such a big question, and I certainly I think if I knew all of the answers, I would have a federal government solving America's, economic development problems. But let me, let me try to tackle it one more time. You know, the issue of uneven economic development is one that folks in my world constantly think about. You know, sociologists, economists, urban planners, this is what we think about because economic development is the backbone of whether a place thrives or doesn't, and whether the people in those places thrive. So one of the things I'm going to try to not get to, like, I'm giving a lecture to my graduate students, but bear with me, you know, in when the manufacturing economy essentially collapsed in the United States in the 1970s, I mean, it started earlier.

But, you know, this exodus of jobs, right, that were good paying jobs that didn't require a bachelor's degree, a lot of them in cities as well. People lived sort of what at the time we would consider kind of the American dream. You know, I mean, there's a whole bunch of stuff that's involved in that. But, but that left and it's replaced. It weren't the same kind of good paying manufacturing jobs.

They were service sector. They were part time. And there were also vast parts of the country that didn't even get those jobs either. What happened in its wake was the emergence of, you can call it the creative class. You can call it the knowledge economy, the global, you know, high level managerial, professional class. You know, these are finance jobs, tech jobs, professional jobs, lawyers, doctors. They take center stage in powering not just the United States economy, but the world economy and those jobs, at least, and this is how I was taught as a graduate in those jobs, primarily resided in cities with the data suggests, is that there is spillover, that those jobs did trickle into parts of rural America.

And I think for some parts of rural America, that combination, because I don't believe everyone needs a bachelor's degree to survive. In fact, the data would suggest otherwise. But you need some threshold of knowledge economy work in a place and in other parts. You see, like particularly in the Midwest, you see the rise of agriculture, which also has really lifted that economy. So it's places that are missing those kinds of jobs in kind of, in kind of, completely that I think are really struggling the South also, we can't ignore historical discrimination. We can't ignore all of the awfulness of racism that occurred in the South disproportionately, and how that has a legacy, a huge effect on the economy even today.

So that's another specific issue in the South, in, in places like Appalachia, you know, these are places where the economy really hinged on mining. And that just disappeared. And so it's really about the idea of how what kind of balance you can have in particular regions where it's not that everyone has to be a lawyer, but some people have to be lawyers, and then those lawyers have and, and doctors and work in tech and then they, they, they then patronize restaurants and they're able to have a stronger tax base for the school. So it's an it's a really it's a very complicated but important dynamic.

ORRELL: That with the drilling on that, field, pardon the expression, since we're talking about Appalachia, on the differences in Appalachia, regionally, you know, we with our data suggests that the northern end of Appalachia is really stuck. Whereas the southern end of Appalachia, which is predominantly in the South, is actually doing pretty well and, is, growing, economically and is more socially cohesive and, and, so it's a, it's a reverse picture of what you just described, which is that within Appalachia. So actually the South, the, the southern end of it, that's doing pretty well there.

And that's, that's suffering. And I just wondered if that came up in your research at all, like looking at, the southern end of the, of the Appalachian chain. If you did interviews in that region, did you pick up on this distinction between north and South?

CURRID-HALKETT: You know, that's a great question. And I didn't specifically, my book because my book was about or is about all of rural America. I didn't drill down specifically on the distinctions within Appalachia. But you bring up something. I think that's really important. And I'm thinking of Raj Shetty's work here, where he could literally see differences from one block to another and the outcomes. And so I think it even gets back to how we started this conversation, which is that we can look broadly. And at some point we're all looking broadly at a region.

So I'm talking about Appalachia, Appalachian, the South. But actually, even as I said that, I thought, well, there's parts of the South that are actually really thriving. I mean, the finance industry is really doing incredibly in Atlanta, you know? So how do you pass that out? I mean, where does the specificity stop and the generalizations begin or vice versa? So I think you make an excellent point, that even in a place like Appalachia, which we feel we can talk about, generally there are differences, just like, you know, you see those differences in neighborhoods, in cities.

ORRELL: So, I'm sorry, I'll one more question and I'll let this go. But, if we've we talked about the need to be very targeted, in our, assistance, what should we be targeting? You know, if it isn't geography, I mean, that you can have you can have healthy spots even within regions that are otherwise not thriving. You can have vast regions in which a lot of people aren't thriving. I think of Native American reservations, as an example. So what are we looking at again to try to, like, if we want to target, what are we targeting? We're not targeting geography. We're targeting something else. So what are we targeting?

CURRID-HALKETT: Well, I think I mean, I think we are in some ways still targeting geography in the sense that if we're going to make interventions, they're very much place specific. So I think that that still is very important. And this is me as an urban planner talking. But I really do believe that when we talk broadly about policy intervention, that we lose sight of what's going on in real places.

So I do still think it's very place specific. You know, I think it's a combination of things. A lot of people, including myself, have talked a lot about the importance of education and cultural capital. I still believe that's important, but I think it's more than that. I think that we have. We have to see that our economy is comprised of lots of different people who don't all have college degrees, and they don't all need them. But what you do need is a thriving ecosystem. So if you think about targeting, in Appalachia, you know, parts of it are really tough to solve. But if you think about a place like my hometown, where, I mean, my hometown is a giant rural hospital. So it's kind of unfair to say I had this kind of safety net, like, you know, TRW left, Merck left, you know.

What do you what do you do in those situations? Do you do you try to lure or do you think about it as an infrastructure issue? You've got all this big factory space. Do you try to move in other industry? They've got strong public schools, so that's another one. How do you make sure that local public schools are stronger to give people opportunity to do, to get a college degree or not get a college degree? So I think it really for me, I look at it as what's actually going on in a particular place. What is clearly lacking? What do they need a boost? And then how do you invest? And then then there's myriad tools to deal with that, whether it is trying to lure firms or whether it is about boosting education systems or whether it's basic things, which I think this is something. Getting back to Appalachia. How do people access food? You know, how do people have running water? I mean, you know, there's a way in which we get lost intellectually about economic development as jobs and industry. And it's like there's some in certain parts of this country. There's some really basic stuff that that people need before we even start thinking about that kind of other higher level stuff.

ORRELL: Yeah, that's certainly true of, native reservations. We just, you know, basic, the most basic infrastructure really isn't there. So go ahead to.

PIPA: I was just gonna say, Rosebud, I really appreciate you just even referencing Danville and kind of the, you know, they lost, like you said. They lost. They lost Merck. Those were big employers there for a long time, but they do have. So it really does, I think, highlight the place specificity, because they do have a regional hospital that's still has a has a great reputation in that area. I've had a couple of knee operations myself, but I never and received great care there.

And they also they have a great public and so that quality of life like those quality of life amenities, they have a great infrastructure in place that might be a way in which they can they can attract others. They've also got, you know, interstates right nearby. So they've got, you know, good transportation corridor of those kinds of things. But that might be a much different recipe there than might be in, for example, you know, a place that I looked at for the podcast, Thomas and Davis, West Virginia. Right. Where, they also lost major industry, but it wasn't necessarily so well situated to be able to. And they did something completely different. Right? They, they went to a completely different economy almost in some respects, but are doing quite well on it.

But the, the local specificity I think is really important as well as the local leadership. Like taking our nod from them rather than coming in with a solution from the outside, finding the way in which we need to support where they want to go as well, and where they think, you know, they're well situated and well positioned. But I want to transition, like to the next part of your book that the way I read it, which is that then you also even before you got into your interviews, you kind of even looked at the data around how rural and urban look at some of large, you know, kind of policy issues, like we've got a conventional wisdom that, you know, rural folks think really differently about some of the even some of the national political and policy issues than urban people feel.

But I don't think like the way I read your book is I thought you showed that there's, a lot more of a Venn diagram or a lot more similarity about how rural and urban people approach some, some issues, even some hot button issues around, like, racial preferences or things like that. Can you just talk a little bit about, like, as you were setting up for your interviews, what the data said to you? About that.

CURRID-HALKETT: I was look my going in position was rural Americans are decent people like the rest of us. And of course there are people in cities and in rural America who are unpleasant and hold views we don't agree with. Okay, so that was my position going in. However, I was really blown away by the similarity in responses that I saw in the quantitative data. So I use the University of Chicago's General Social Survey, and it's an amazing data set. It allows you to look at America's views on anything from their marriage to policy to sex to democracy.

I mean, you name it, they have asked the question. And it was really extraordinary to me that when I looked at issues that as a society, we tend to care about the environment, affirmative action, social policy, women's rights, marriage equality, that to the, for the vast majority of those questions, urban and rural Americans thought the same way. So take the issue of democracy. How proud of you. Are you of America's, form of democracy? 50% of rural Americans, 50% of urban Americans. How much confidence do you have in the executive, legislative, judicial branch? 50% of people have hardly any. And that's rural and urban. That's not great. By the way, that's not a great finding. But what it shows you is we're not like in totally different universes here at all. I found it the environmental questions because I think we, in coastal areas really kind of fetishize that, that, that value. Right.

And there's a lot of performative aspects of it, you know, whether it's the Tesla or the tote bag, you know, broadcasting your support for the environment. You think of it as an urban issue. But when you look at the data, rural Americans are just as concerned about our environment. They think not enough is being done. So the data actually affirms that we could have serious conversations about these issues. We are we are largely seeing things the same way. And then I we can talk about this a little bit more than I talk to people. And I found that their responses really aligned with what the data said. These were not these were not too different, wasn't like the data said one thing. And then when I talk to people, said something else, I mean, they really corroborated one another.

ORRELL: So can I, ask, we talk about rural America, we're talking about a much more racially diverse population than I think gets stuck in people's minds. And the books out there being written like white rural rage and, and, on topics of that sort. Is part of what, is part of what we're missing in this discussion is the racial diversity of rural America that, you know, in other words, do black rural Americans think differently than white rural Americans? And, and when you kind of push them together and say, this is rural America, this diverse population, you get a very different picture than just focusing either on either one or the other.

CURRID-HALKETT: That's an excellent question. I want to stay in my lane because I didn't specifically study racial disparities. But what I will say is I went back to look at the general social survey data. And in the questions that I asked that I looked at, where you could isolate race, which

wasn't all of them, but in some of them, there's you're right, there is a difference. If you pull out, for example, the question on, support for, the black community financial support, government support for the black community, when you isolate, black and minority, respondents from white, you see that there's disproportionately more support from minority communities. But that is true for urban America, too. That is not unique to rural America. It, it is clear that when you look at folks who have had discrimination, who who've had to deal with that in your and they're asked, should there be more support for our community?

The answer is yes. Whereas white folks, whether you live in rural America or urban America, are less supportive. So that but that's not unique to rural America. So I think that's really important that that is a racial issue. But it's not geographic necessarily. But overall, I think that that is something that's worth pursuing those differences in how folks might, based on their gender, based on their, on their race, how they might respond to things. But I think. I think that even if that is true, there is a larger takeaway that we can't lose sight of, which is that we may have different views geographically. And I think that even to say rural versus urban is too broad. However, the thing I took away from the analysis I did was that we're not like two cultural universes. And so I find it really problematic when books come out and public intellectuals spout about this group of angry, rural Americans, it's like, I don't know. Sure, there are angry rural Americans. There's also a lot of angry urban Americans. So I don't I really think that that's just not fair.

ORRELL: Yeah, yeah. No, it's a good point.

CURRID-HALKETT: And I also, I think and we can maybe talk about this a little bit more, but I also I'm not sure what folks end games are when they push that argument like. I mean, do you think when you call someone, a homophobic or racist that they're going to vote for your party? I don't know what the game is here to say things like that, because I don't agree. You know, from the data I've looked at, I think a lot of other folks who've really gotten into rural America, it's a much more complicated picture. But I also don't know if those kinds of arguments are really, healing our country or furthering the discussion. They feel very much like they're kind of shutting things down.

PIPA: Well, and before I ask my question, let me just, remind the audience, if you've got a question that's coming up for you out of this conversation, you can pose it or email to events at Brookings, Dot Edu or post on Twitter, at Brookings Global to hashtag on the front porch. But let me ask you, Elizabeth, because you that not just looked at the data, but then you talk to a lot of folks and frankly, from my reading the book, it seems like a lot of those folks, were white rather than, you know, like, like a huge, level of diversity. And despite maybe the data and the polling that you were looking at, and the surveying, I mean, there is obviously, different political decisions being made, between rural and urban.

So, just start us off like. As you had those conversations. How did those conversations provide you a perspective or a window into how we can be living in a in a time where there seems to be a lot of overlap? And about concerns on the larger issues, but just a lot of difference are talking past each other on how we even care about those things. Just if you can even start us off with first impressions from your conversations, what did you start to learn and what did that then prompt for you to continue to do inquiry around.

CURRID-HALKETT: So thank you. Tony. So I, I've always loved this is my fourth book, and my favorite part of research is talking to people. I just, I don't know, it's just the best. I like it more than numbers. So I just listen to people. I ask them, you know, I have a series of questions. Do you believe in democracy? What's your view on, equality in this country? Do you think it exists? What's your favorite holiday? I mean, just I just want to get to know people and understand how they view the world. What I found was so extraordinary is that it was probably two thirds, three quarters of the way through the interview where I would say I would find out their political affiliation. And I could not have told you all the money in the world if they were Democratic, Republican, if they had voted for Trump once or twice or never until I ask that question.

Because and I don't mean to get kind of. Sentimental here. I think, you know, when you just talk to people and you're kind of in, even if it's the metaphorical room with them and you just talk to them as a person rather than as a vote, and you find that people are pretty reasonable most of the time and that they're used on their kids and their lives. And this country are really similar. And for me, that gave

me such a sense of optimism. And in a time that is so divided. I'm frustrated because I don't believe that as public intellectuals, as the media, even, you know, as the way in which our political parties are operating that we're really seizing on the opportunity, which is that if you just talk to each other as people, we might find some sort of common ground here. But that was what I felt was that actually, if we did, we could get along with most people. And again, I want to caveat this because it's, it's it may come across that I'm saying that everyone is like that. I don't mean that there are tales in in particular places, in particular parties where that's not the case.

There's intolerable behavior that that goes on that that's not I'm talking about most people. Most people are reasonable. They share the same values. They care about this country, and they don't actually dislike each other at all. I mean, that was one thing that was really interesting is that for all of this conversation around, you know, Trump voters really disliking Democrats or cities or the it just people, I never came across anyone who dislike the fellow American simply because of their political party or at all. Actually, that just wasn't that just wasn't how people spoke about each other or this country.

PIPA: You then in the book go to, well, let me ask this, actually, through your conversations, because I think one of the things that we look at when and that I feel actually, when I'm, visiting rural communities is that, no matter what, whether that rural place is actually doing well or, struggling a bit, that the, the local things that kind of make up the health of a town, you know, the banks or the local newspaper or the local hospital, like what we were talking about in Danville or the library or, grocery stores, that there is a sense of pressure under those like, areas of community, that, that come up when you're having conversation with people that they feel like that they didn't have access to the things that need that, that, that their towns might need or that they might need personally to support themselves. Was that part of the conversations? What was your sense of that as you had your conversations with people?

CURRID-HALKETT: What I found striking was their ability to acknowledge. The lack of resources and to still. Feel okay in the world. So let me give you a couple of examples of this. And this is actually this is, Appalachia. I, I'm thinking in particular of three people I interviewed in the heart of Appalachia who,

one of whom lived in a place that didn't really have running water, or their, the place that they lived in and, another who lived in a, mobile home, and, another who I didn't have a whole sense of where they lived, but they didn't have a lot. They, you know, they weren't they didn't have a college degree. They didn't they kind of ran a boarding house. So I'm giving you an example of these three people. They had no resources. One of the folks I spoke to described the way in which you would get a tomato or a zucchini, that it would take over an hour to get to a place that might have fresh food.

So you could you could drive like 45 minutes and maybe get canned food. And most people in his community would actually go to the gas station for food, and they would have, you know, onion rings or whatever. It wasn't that they were selling that kind of fast food, and that was how they had to eat every day. These people had nothing. And. To talk. And one of the things that was so beautiful and this was this was, the man Clay I spoke to. Who, who lived in a place that didn't have, you know, he didn't use running water that often. He, he didn't at the time. I think he was kind of working at a coffee shop. He just he discussed very eloquently and clearly the limitations of his community. And then he said, but poverty is not the only way that we define ourselves. I mean, this is a community of people. And yes, it's hard. It's I'm paraphrasing him.

Yes, it's hard, but there's more to us than this. And, another woman I spoke with, Shannon, who I, I spoke with a lot. She was one of the people I developed a real relationship with. And she found a lot of. Resilience in her religious community. That these were people that she could connect with, that she saw regularly. And she had a tough life. I mean, you know, it's probably not for right now, but she was going through an awful lot and there was never a day I spoke to her that she wasn't able to see a way through it. And I have to say, more so than a lot of people I know who are living in affluent, resource filled pockets of Los Angeles, in New York, you know, I mean, I really I, I was sort of astounded by their tenacity.

ORRELL: I'm glad you brought up religion, because we needed to shift to a less controversial topic, and I, and I was really fascinated, on the with the data on religion and you, posit something which was quite counterintuitive. And I'd like you to explain a, about how the differences in, religious, interest in religion, religious behavior, the importance of religion is another one of these areas where the

differences between urban and rural Americans are more apparent than real, that, that Americans remain a very religious people, but that this religion is being expressed differently. So could you sort of unpack that? Because I think it's fascinating. I think it's really, really important to this conversation.

CURRID-HALKETT: Thank you, Brent, and I wish I would have stolen that line from you if I had it under in my book. Yeah, because I think you so beautifully summed it up. Yeah. So if you look at the general social survey data, you find that almost. Like across the board. Rural and urban Americans are spiritual and religious in equal measure. They really share. I mean, there's not a big difference at all. I would say rural Americans are slightly more religious. They're almost identically as spiritual as their urban counterparts. This is, by the way, I'm not the first person to. When I saw this data, I was like, what? Because you're just living in a city I and growing up in a small town, my kind of the overt experience of people's relationship to religion and spirituality would suggest the opposite. But actually, Robert Putnam has found this too.

This is this is actually a something that others have found as well. So it's not even new information that we all believe in God or don't believe in God. Similarly, and the same with spirituality. What I think is important, and this is what I found when I talk to people, is the way in which religion is a public and overt part of one's identity in rural America and not in urban America. So one thing that struck me when I was doing my interviews was that when I talked to people, they brought up their relationship to God almost immediately. They were not self-conscious. They were very, very, proud is the wrong word. They were just very open like this. You know, my relationship to God is really important. I go to the church. This is just. I didn't even have to ask. It would just come up.

And I realized as I was doing these interviews that I didn't really know the religious stance of most of my friends. I, you know, I knew if they were Jewish or they were Catholic or they were Protestant, but I didn't know. Did they believe in God? And here this virtually this stranger I knew already right away how they felt about God. I mean, we got really deep really quickly. And it made me think about the function of religion, not just in our personal relationship to a god, or spirituality, but rather what how does it fit in to our relationship with our community and in rural America? And I talked to Robert Watts now, who wrote a brilliant book, The Left Behind, about rural America.

So when I was talking to him about this and he said, you know, in rural America, you don't have, you know, tons of different institutions where you form your social and cultural capital. It's not like there's like the MoMA and then there's the opera house, and then there's that cool theater or the lecture series or Brookings, you know, where there's all of these different places where people, these institutions where this happens. So small town America is limited in that respect, so that the church plays a very, very big role in social and cultural capital. And so it's about more than the personal. It's about the community as well. And so I think that becomes a really important. I mean, you don't even you lose sight of the fact that it's personal. It's about your identity. And I think that that in some ways is kind of a larger conversation about how we, form cultural capital and how we, deliver it and signify it, in a, you know, in a wider group.

ORRELL: So, you know, one question that your book left me with and on around this issue. And this is reflected in, the last, front porch that we had with Carol Graham, is. Individualism versus, versus community. Sort of community attachments. And we see this, you know, the history of the African-American community in this country has been intimately meshed with the church, because the church was an institution that black Americans could actually control. That they it was their focal point, and when they were embedded in cultures in which they didn't have access to power elsewhere. All right. What Carol pointed out was that, you know, Americans, white Americans, and particularly white rural Americans are quite individualistic, in almost every aspect of their lives.

And, and they really believe the narrative of, you know, that I am responsible for my, for my success or failure and that you would you can't blame, problem, you know, sort of macro problems for, as a source of individual problems. So I'm curious. And this happened. Your interviews are happening during the pandemic, and I think that colors this conversation somewhat because so many churches had to shut down and go to virtual services and so on. But there's also a phenomenon of people who call themselves evangelicals but rarely go to church. And I'm wondering if that came up in your interviews. Are people religious? Are white American, white rural Americans? Are they religious in an individualistic way? Or did they actually reflect connection to institutions?

Because, I think there's a lot of data out there is it's just that the institutional white. Of religion in rural America is eroding. Some would say collapsing. But there there's still a very strong individual, kind of relationship between the individual and, their deity.

CURRID-HALKETT: Wow. Okay, this is such a good question. I think I can answer some of it with confidence and some of that I can put forth my hypotheses. And, so I think just from just from the start, I think America is a very individualistic place. I think we do tend to be all of us, wired to believe we are responsible for our actions, for our outcomes, for our futures. So I'm not sure that that's actually a really specific attribute. So does it manifest in religion more for rural Americans, perhaps. But I think that it's a, it's a general takeaway about Americans. The folks that I talked to went to church a lot, so I can't say I ran into a lot of people who talked about God and didn't go to church. These people were going to church a lot. I yeah.

So, I don't know. It's maybe it's a different group of people. So I'm not saying that those people don't exist. I'm just saying I didn't come across them. But this it it's interesting. Now you've got me thinking, and I'm going to just kind of get a little bit out of my comfort zone, because this isn't my research, but I'm hypothesizing, you know, one of the things I am really interested in is cultural capital. And I've talked a little bit about this. My last book was really about it. And this book deals with it in terms of how it might explain some of our divides. One of the things that was really clear to me was the way in which we have a constellation of things we want to reveal to the world about ourselves. So what I found in urban America, with the with the groups that I spoke to. So I don't think this is actually true of all groups.

So your reference to African-Americans and the relationship to the church, I think a lot of, minority communities, immigrant communities in urban America, are very overtly tied to their religious institutions. But in the kind of secular, kind of meritocratic, urban, circles you may have, that is a private belief. And yet your overt cultural capital would be your New Yorker tote bag or what you read in the New York Times that morning, or the exhibition at the museum down the street and so forth.

So it may be also that in rural America, folks who aren't deeply religious in a practicing way, in an overt way, still, you still need religion as a part of their identity because it's a part of the identity of their community in the way that folks who are in certain circles in urban America might need to read the opinion page of The New York Times, because that's the currency in which they communicate. So religion is a very important. And this isn't to disrespect religion in any way. I want to just pull that. But I think it's a very important, currency conversation community builder. So if you're not a big part of it, you may be very much out of, those kinds of social community, gatherings. So that may be what? That I'm wondering if that's what's going on in what you're talking about here, what you bring up.

PIPA: Elizabeth, just for our audience, some of whom may not have read the book. You use that term cultural capital, and there's actually a big theme in the book. And even in my introduction, I talked about how a lot of your research is around culture. Can you just define when you say cultural capital? What do you mean by that, and how is it different from social capital? A lot of people might be, you know, is it the same? Is it different? What do you mean by that? Because I think part of your thesis here is that cultural capital works differently in rural places than it does in urban places, and that's part of the reason by which there's a misunderstanding, or misperceptions.

CURRID-HALKETT: So cultural. This is a great question. I don't want to get in trouble with the sociologists, but, I know my PhD is a great--

ORRELL: Deal.

CURRID-HALKETT: And I and I actually, I will I will finish up my definition with the conversation I had with Robert Watts, now, who is a sociologist who studied rural America. So I feel like legitimized by the conversation I had with him. So cultural capital is essentially the sum of your social assets, your education, your knowledge. And that knowledge isn't simply what you read. It can be an interest in NASCAR. It can be an interest in rodeos. It can be an interest in reading The New Yorker or attending a museum. So it's a wide array of different kinds of knowledge and information. And it's often how we communicate.

And this is where I could get in trouble, with social with your social community and your social capital. So your social capital then becomes the sum of your social networks. The people in your social circle, which are not tend not don't tend to be close ties, but a kind of extension of people who might even get you a job, write you a letter for college, and so forth. They are distinct concepts, but I've always had trouble with that because I feel like they are in lockstep. I was talking about this with Robert was now and, and we were having this conversation about the fact that certainly in rural America, they are in lockstep. And I would argue they are in urban America, too. Your social capital is formed through your cultural capital and vice versa.

So, you know, my you know, working at USC and the podcasts I listen to and, the books that I read help me form social capital. Right. And the social capital, the people I engage with are also informing my cultural capital by suggesting things to read and listen to and learn about. And so I think there's a really symbiotic relationship between the two. And I think the way and I love this question, Tony, because I, after writing this book, talk. Okay, first of all, looking at all this data and saying rural America at war, you know, generally is doing really well. We've got our problem areas. We need to focus on those. But let's not compare Iowa to West Virginia.

They're two different places, right. And the same way that we shouldn't be comparing Akron, Ohio to Manhattan, I mean, again, two different places. But I looked at all this data. Then I look at this general social survey data folks have really, you know, largely similar views on the world. You talk to people similar. What's going on here? Why do we have this divide? Is it just not real? I mean, it's not it is real. But I do think that we trump it up a lot. I think that we need to stop talking about the divide so much and start talking about where we might have things in common, but that doesn't really sell newspapers. That's the problem. But, but what I really think gets to the heart of it is this distinction between people's cultural capital and what we value overtly. And what I have really sensed, and I, is that rural Americans feel very looked down upon.

And they're not wrong. I mean, there is a lot of media and, books looking down on and judging them as a group. And the things that they care about are not valued, by the cultural hegemony, in the same way that urban culture, urban elite culture is valued. And I think that that really is the divide in this

country. It's not our fundamental beliefs. It's not us as human beings. It's the things that we associate with our identity and how we show them to the world, and whether they are accepted or whether they're looked down upon and judged.

ORRELL: So let me. No, go ahead Tony.

PIPA: I was just going to say, let me let me push on that a bit because it strikes me. And I'm sorry we actually didn't talk about this one before. But, when we were talking about the book, before. Beforehand, but. It strikes me that, maybe folks from urban areas would then say, okay, if we're talking about cultural capital in the way you just defined it, then say media would be part of that cultural capital. And when we talked to Nick Jacobs, for our first on the front porch, conversation, who had looked at rural voters, you know, we had a conversation about media.

And if right wing media, for example, was part of what's dividing us or part of what's influencing, how rural America might perceive things differently than, than, people in urban America. And so I'm just wondering, like how you would think about that. We're talking about religion now. And you, you spent a lot of time actually on religion in the book. But are differences in media part of this as well? Are they different? The other differences in media that are part of that cultural capital, that are, that are actually helping, deepen some of these divisions?

CURRID-HALKETT: Yeah, definitely. Tony, I think that's a great question. So I think, first of all, that that if you choose to I, I'm a I'm a loyal New York Times subscriber, but I also get on Fox News sometimes I'm really interested in whether they're covering the same topics, how they're covering them. I think it's really important because I think if we are staying in our one track, there's just a whole different story that's being told to us for the same. Event is being interpreted in different ways. So and this is not a country. We don't what PBS is pretty good at this, but it's not like the BBC. Like you don't have this kind of super neutral just reporting the facts, with no meaning, in the way that you, you, you see with the BBC where you sort of feel that your, you're getting just the news with no political agenda.

That's, that's tough in this country now, because I think a lot of our media is slightly left, slightly right, or really left really right. So I think that that does feed the divide. For sure. There's another thing though that's going on. Some of the people I talked to, they didn't even watch Fox News or CNN or, MSNBC. They did didn't have cable. And they were getting news from YouTube. And so we know that that's a problem because it's really, unfettered. It's not it's a no, it's not really regulated. It's not going to be fact checked. And so that can be a real problem because we don't know what we are. Actually, we do know that there's a lot of misinformation.

And we saw this with the pandemic with, the way in which vaccines were, really given a bad name by certain people who were just really anti-vaccine, and then they would come across as, authorities, and, and giving misinformation. We know this. I think the New York Times did, a big article identifying the people who were creating this misinformation about COVID and about vaccines. So we know this to be true, but that then becomes an issue for our country because it's really expensive to get high quality news. You know, I mean, the paywalls on every single, media outlet that you'd want to read. I mean, you might get one free article or two free articles, but it's really difficult. It's also difficult to know where to get good news.

So, you know, people here maybe take it for granted that there's these places to go. But that's not really straightforward for folks who live in West Virginia or Kentucky. If they're not, you know, they don't have cable news. They don't maybe they don't have they're kind of worried about where they're going to get dinner, let alone a subscription to a major newspaper. So if we want to, mitigate some of this misinformation, some of these divides, we need to create access to better news to, for folks. I think that's really, really crucial. I think that's a policy issue.

PIPA: Sorry I was cutting you off there. If you want to come in.

ORRELL: No. Let's, let's go ahead and move on. I mean, I, another area that I really wanted to get into, get into with you, is you have some, you devote, a fair amount of real estate in the book to the need to, foster opportunity, among, younger people living in rural areas. And I think that's, worth discussing. It really maps quite well to, to what we have learned, about, community level economic

opportunity and, and what you've already said about, you know, if you've got a certain number of knowledge workers in your town, that that really helps. But it's also a certain number of bachelor's degrees. And you talked about your own experience in the book, talk about, what, what and how we need to expand access to educational services, and to education generally, in order to promote opportunity in rural areas.

CURRID-HALKETT: So, you know, if I had the answer to this question that, you know, I feel for those of us who are not education specialists, it looks so obvious we give more money to public school systems. We pay teachers better, we get better guidance counselors, and they we give free test prep. And these kids then have a chance to go to the school that they want to go to. But it's obviously not that straightforward. What I will say is I think that we have. We've actually done a disservice to two different sets of students, the students who are just immediately expected to go to university. Often. They are the children of married parents who are very educated, professionals, and the kids who live in communities where their parents may not have gone to college. They don't have a lot of money.

They're predominantly rural. And the problem is that. Some of those kids who are kind of expected to just go to university and get a college, we will see that. I mean, I don't need to I can give the quick CliffsNotes that we have. There's an abundance of research coming out on the mental health of our teenagers who feel highly pressured, competitive learning environments absolutely falling apart because they're not getting into an Ivy League or Ivy League equivalent. And it's just that's not a good situation either. And some of them, you might sit down and they might say, I want to be an artist or I want to be a carpenter, but that's just never even an option. And then you get in particularly rural areas in this country. Kids who absolutely are college bound.

But how does that even happen for them? And you see it up close in particularly these affluent urban environments where there's a, you know, people are hiring educational consultants, their kids are getting S.A.T. training. They have this whole way of doing things that it's just it doesn't even cross the mind of folks in rural America. So what do we do there? I think that there are some. Interesting possibilities. I think that in the same way that we have things like teach for America, we could have ways in which younger kids can have a cultural exchange. They can.

You can have rural students go to urban environments and vice versa. That's not just helping with cultural divisions or perceived cultural divisions, but it's showing a universe. I think that is where I see the greatest limitations. There's a few other things I think that we. I am someone who believes that the SAT is a path for kids who are disadvantaged. I don't think it should be test optional. I think it's actually a really good tool for people who aren't able to go to the Galapagos or learn lacrosse to show how smart they are, and that they have they have a lot of opportunity to do that through, too, through a standardized exam that they don't get if it gets removed. I also and I don't know how we do this. I've thought a lot about this. I think our universities and they're getting better at it, but they need much more outreach to rural communities to identify the students. That would be great in their universities. I think that is so important.

ORRELL: So, but what about the role of, of schools? Guidance counselors, parents to. How do, I mean, I, I see this a lot in my work of great skepticism toward, particularly toward, for your bachelor degree. You know, education, and almost a kind of hostility to it. And if there, if that hostility is there, that's its own barrier. And then you have, and I think you talk about this in the book, but, you know, sort of the talented 10th issue, kids who are really on top of it, you know, in terms of wanting to pursue college, they get the attention, and they get the support, the, sort of limited amount of support that's available tends to flow towards them, in our schools. So. We've got both a pole problem and a push problem. Yeah. In terms of, encouraging talented young people to pursue, self-development. And, I was really intrigued by it. But, I have to say about your own experience of, like, maybe I didn't go far enough, you know, like, was there enough push, coming, from your from your community. Anyway, if you could reflect on that a little bit.

CURRID-HALKETT: It's a really good question. And. I'll be honest, I think we, look, I live in Los Angeles. My friends tend to be people with not just bachelor's degrees, graduate degrees. A lot of them have kids who are in high school now, and I'm watching what they're doing. And there is no universe where my parents or my peers parents would have been doing what my friends are doing now and what I'm what. And I think that's because there's an enormous amount of resources and cultural capital in our cities that tell us what we're supposed to do to get our kid into one of those top 25 schools.

And I just think that there's an absence of that information in a widespread way in rural America. If we're talking particularly about those disadvantaged communities, what are those? Parents do not have time to be thinking about which extracurricular when they're trying to figure out rent, or there's a relative who is in opioid addiction, right. In other places, in thriving rural communities, it may simply be a lack of information, not a lack of will. It also may be a mindset, which is that I'm doing really well and my kid doesn't need to go to college. I want to say that may in fact be true. Here's the thing I have problems with. I think every kid should have the opportunity. And I mean, this it's this is not rural specific. This is across this country.

You should have an opportunity to say, I want to be a carpenter. I want to be a lawyer. And I and I have a choice to do those things. And that path is there for me. Should it should I want to take it? That's really clear. If you're living in an affluent part of a city, that that path of college is there for you, but the other path isn't really approved of. Whereas in our rural communities, the path of a vocational job, or a job that doesn't require a college degree is there. But what if you want to be a Supreme Court judge one day? Maybe that's a dream of yours that you want to work for the New York Times like that's not or that or work at Brookings or I mean, that that's not even a given. That's not in any way spelled out for you how that might happen.

ORRELL: So, yeah, I think this is this is a critical point, that we need to be supporting all of our kids, including kids in rural America, in terms of their pursuit of a, as a vocational calling, you know, like, what am I actually gifted for? Rather than what are the opportunities or immediately available to me? Those are two very different sets of questions.

CURRID-HALKETT: That's a really great way of putting it, because I think that that that is true of both our urban and rural kids. That's not a that is not specific.

PIPA: What I would add on to that friend from a rural perspective is that, those gifts might, need to be supported elsewhere. For example, you might want to go to college that is not in your rural place. But I think what rural places are uniquely challenged by then is to say, but there may be opportunity for you to do that back in your hometown or their like. I'd like to see that place where they grew up as a

place where those gifts could flourish, even if they need to be supported and nurtured and cultivated elsewhere.

ORRELL: And I would take this back to the cultural capital conversation that we've been having, which is there needs to be change in our educational institutions. Our four year institutions. To think about people from rural areas as needing particular encouragement and support in the same way that we think about other disadvantaged populations. Yeah. If you're disadvantaged from a rural area, you need the same kind of social, cultural, support that we would that we as a, as a matter of sort of second nature apply to, kids. Low income, disadvantaged kids from urban areas. Yeah. You know, we don't we know that that's necessary. But I don't think that our colleges and universities really think very seriously at all about the barriers, the On-Campus barriers to people being able to sustain educational engagement when they're coming from this vastly different culture. Well, maybe it's not that vast, but a different culture, that, that kids from our suburbs and our advantaged urban areas come from.

PIPA: I think that's, I think that's a great point, but let me just because I'm also looking at the time and I want to get to some of the questions that we've had from the audience. And I'm going to, I'm going to warn you, Elizabeth, some of these are tough questions.

CURRID-HALKETT: I'll try to answer them.

PIPA: But we've had a couple of different questions, actually, that relate to, confidence. And you talked about this, earlier on in conversation, but talk about confidence in governmental institutions in rural places and the conversation we were just having about cultural capital. You know, you made a distinction between how cultural capital may work differently in rural versus urban. How do you think, and does that or some other thing apply to how do we build how do you think rural Americans confidence in government institutions can be strengthened? How are they viewing their governments now, whether it's local, state or federal? And, what can we do to kind of improve that relationship? And how important is it to improve? How important is it to rural America's future to improve that relationship?

CURRID-HALKETT: Well, it's a really good question, but I'm I don't feel I have all of the knowledge to answer because I didn't ask this question specifically, and I didn't look at those questions in the General Social Survey. However, I do have some thoughts here. Many years ago, Michael Porter wrote an excellent piece in the Harvard Business Review called The Competitive Advantage of the Inner City. The great piece. I still teach it to my students, and in it he talks about the wariness that folks in the inner city have towards government intervention. And the argument is that they've had enough experience with interventions that have exploited them, that they are very, very wary of any sort of big box retail or government coming in and, you know, claiming to sort things out because they they've had an experience that it doesn't work out that way.

And I would extrapolate from that, that I think rural communities, particularly the more disadvantaged ones, probably have the same sentiment. How do we solve that? Well, this is Mike, an urban planner in me. This is community plan, city planning. You sit down and talk to people, and if you want to get involved, you don't just come in or just talk to the mayor. You're actually having conversations with the community about how these changes or interventions might help them, and you're listening to them. I think that that's a pretty basic one when we're talking about ground level community development.

PIPA: Let me continue to push on that, because and there were a couple of questions even, that were more about like, you know, if we think that rural America is overrepresented, like in the Senate, you know, why aren't folks getting. Why aren't those representatives getting more resources, to rural places? Let me just ask, like in your conversations with folks, because some of the, some of the conversation we even had with Nick Jacobs about the rural voter, at the beginning, you know, there is a strain of polling where rural Americans feel as if they are they are overlooked by policymakers or that they're, that their interests are not being advanced or protected when policy decisions get made and that they get disproportionately low or set of resources. I mean, the title of your book is The Overlooked Americans. In your conversations with folks that they feel as if, you know, government or policymakers or the elite or did not have their best interest at heart, and how did that manifest? And how do we think about that?

CURRID-HALKETT: They didn't speak specifically about the government. They did. Many of them were able to voice feeling that certainly people in our cities think we're just a bunch of hillbillies. They don't really think what we have to say matters. They weren't, by the way. They didn't feel the love wasn't mutual. I mean, they didn't then say, yeah, I'm, you know, urban elites, gosh, they're so annoying or whatever. Like they didn't say anything negative back. They just said, yeah, I don't think people in cities really have a lot of time for us.

PIPA: But I think that people in cities would say, rural Americans think they're the real Americans. They're the most patriotic. And they look on us with disdain, like, how do we reconcile that? Okay. Well.

CURRID-HALKETT: Yeah. That's it. So here, here's something, you know, my knowledge of conservative, rural conservative media is there's a limit to it. But I will say, bear with me for a moment. I think that our liberal elite media is not doing anything to assuage rural concerns, because a lot of it is, you know, the particularly the columnists are very derisive towards rural Americans and paint this caricature of this raging Trump voter who's just out to get cities and elites. And that's not I mean, if I were a rural American, I would not think that urban Americans have a lot of time for me. So but I will say that the rural Americans I spoke to didn't have a problem with urban Americans. What they don't have, though, is a mouthpiece to express that these are just. And this is what I mean by them being overlooked.

These are just folks living in small towns, absorbing what's being told to them about themselves, but they're not able to write back. They don't. Most of them don't have like, social media accounts. They don't write books. They don't have a column. They can't afford a subscription to a newspaper. So they're just absorbing the story of them and they're not really able to push back on it. But despite all of that, none of them ever had anything negative to say about folks that live in cities or elites, quote unquote.

PIPA: Well, let me ask this, because this was, this follows into another question that we got from the audience. How would you think about and, and even in the conversation that you were having, did

you find ways in which, we're that there are models to overcome this division or these misperceptions? I mean, you talked a little bit about, you know, shifting the narrative in the media, for example. We were just talking about exchange, about people going to different hometowns. What would you say about the ways in which we need to overcome, like this, these differences in, how we use cultural capital to kind of retie the and relieve the social fabric and overcome these divisions.

CURRID-HALKETT: So I think, I think the media and in particular public intellectuals play a huge role. I would love to hear Arlie Hochschild and Barbara Kingsolver have like a weekly column, because these are people who get rural America. They understand it's complicated and nuanced, and they aren't judgmental. I mean, that's what we need. So that's the first thing. Now the second thing I think and I think this is hugely important, our politicians have to ditch the device division narrative. They have to ditch it. I think I've certainly seen on the right there is an indulgence of the far right and it's intolerance rather than just enough. You know what? Like there's a lot of really decent conservative Republicans in this country. A lot of them live in rural America. They've got the same values as their fellow Democrats.

Let's have that conversation. But the problem is that that doesn't drum up media hits and it doesn't drum up a kind of active voter. It just doesn't do the kind of, you know, theatrics that has so defined politics in this time. I mean, it's such a shame, but that's actually our politicians are our greatest role models here, that they just have enough of that division narrative.

ORRELL: Yeah. It really strikes me. You know that. You know, rural America has always suffered from, being extract, being part of an extractive economy. Right? We extract resources from rural America, coal, timber, whatever it is. And we don't put much, and, and not much of the profit that then flows back. And I think we're stuck in that right now for exactly the reasons that you said, Elizabeth. That we're extracting votes from rural America. But those votes aren't translating into better lives for people in rural America because it's, instead, they're being given, you know, they're being fed a diet of, what we can call fast food grievance.

You know that. That it takes the place of actual engagement, actual concern, actual policy that might be helpful to people living in, in those areas. But in a to a degree, that's something that the voters need to fix. You know, the voters of a rural America need to stop accepting so little, from their representatives and particularly in the Senate, I think, where they have the most leverage. And I'll just wrap this bit of my sermon up here, but, you know, it really seems to me that, you know, Democrats are the ones who are actually trying to activate policies that serve, rural America. And, they don't get much payback, actually, for their effort in this department. And the benefits of that extractive vote economy seem to flow to Republicans.

CURRID-HALKETT: Well, Brent, I think that's a brilliant point. And I actually feel I should have added this on when I was speaking a couple minutes ago. It's not just the far right that needs to be just a little bit like less indulged. The far left does too, because the problem is that these tales of extreme politics are alienating to a lot of people. But if you're a rural voter and you, you know, to your point, Democratic policies are actually probably more beneficial to you. But the Democratic Party, the super left, which gets most of the media, is basically just vilifying you.

Why would you vote for them? I mean, no one votes for someone who makes them feel bad about themselves. So I think there's a whole thing where we need to get a little more back to basics about what's best for folks in this country. How do we actually get on? I mean, we think of this is so alien, but actually like 20 years ago, that was, you know, people were able to have normal conversations and have differences. And that was okay. That's just like not possible now.

ORRELL: And I've run into this a lot, you know, and trying to talk to kind of the, you know, the elite liberal establishment about the problems of low income white Americans. I mean, it would be an improvement if they were only indifferent. In the case, instead of the well, that's kind of what those people deserve because they are so retrograde in their attitudes, at least, has been filtered to us through Twitter and, and other social media outlets. They kind of deserve this, and that, that indifference, and callousness. I think, really needs to be addressed on the left.

PIPA: Well, what I think, you know, when I and obviously, this even goes to the heart of why we're having these conversations. What I think is most disheartening about this situation to me is that we continue then to get stuck in the cycle of, let's look politics and how do we change the politics versus, to your point, brand earlier, let's have the policy conversations that are necessary, to be able to disaggregate amongst all the diversity that are, across the, the United States. And even one questioner asked whether rural and urban was even like the right frame of reference for us to be using. I think that's a good question.

Maybe that's not even. But to the point is like, what are the policy? What are the implications? And how should we be thinking of the policy that can really support the places, that aren't being given their best foot forward support for their best foot forward to have the economic and social opportunities, that are necessary to thrive in the 21st century. And we need to your point, Elizabeth, elevate as public intellectuals, elevate that public discussion around the policy issues. And we had a few questions, even from the audience, about the election coming up and what how rural Americans might react to, you know, policies that might be put in place should former President Trump, for example, win the election.

And what does your research say about that? And I think that's an important consideration. But we also need to be thinking long term around what are the policies and how do we need to be thinking about those policies over the long term. Rather than getting caught up in this vortex of elections and cycles all the time?

CURRID-HALKETT: Yeah. Well, there was Mayhew's famous book, think called The Election Cycle, The Electoral Connection. I remember reading it in graduate school, and it's just the whole thesis is that essentially politicians are. Are just focused on getting reelected. Constantly. That's their imperative. So how on earth do we think clearly about these issues when that's looming over everyone's head? And my goodness, you make a decision. You're in a, a red state and you have a slightly blue perspective. Does that cost you the election? It's just not this is not a healthy dynamic that we've got going on right now.

PIPA: Yeah. So we're coming up to the end of our time. And this has been a pretty wide ranging conversation. So I really appreciate and I appreciate your willingness to go on this journey with us, because we delve deeply into culture as well as kind of economic and economic development and, and lots of things, in the middle. But I'll just give you the chance to, you know, have we talked about some have we, have we missed something or how would you also what would your final words want to be to our audience? Based on the conversations you had with a whole range of rural Americans and, and the data analysis that you did, as well as the conversation that we've been having here today, I'm just going to give you the chance to have the last word, Elizabeth. So, so take us home.

CURRID-HALKETT: Look, my view is that we can focus on data. We can focus on interviews. But the broad takeaway is we have a lot more in common than we realize. And we have a political and media environment that doesn't want to acknowledge that and isn't bothering to take the time. And I think if we could really focus on that shared humanity, that that would do this whole country a lot of good. I mean, it's this is the thing that I think we've really lost sight of is that a divided country or a country we perceive as divided. Who's having a good time with that? How is that moving anything forward? I think we need to take a little moment back and say, this isn't about media hits. This is about the fact that we need to really talk about how this country has so much good in it and so many good people.

PIPA: I that's, that's a wonderful note to end on. And, I just really appreciate, this conversation. Thanks you. Brent. Thank you. Brent, as always. This has been just a rich learning experience over the past hour and a half. And, and from a southern Columbia tiger, I say we'll see you on Friday night on the gridiron.

CURRID-HALKETT: And, we're actionable organisms.

PIPA: Everybody knows we'll see you on the Ferris wheel or the twister or the Phenix, roller coaster at Koebel’s. But we'll see you also in our next conversation on the front porch on May 3rd. Thanks, everyone. Take care.