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The Current

“What might US rural policy look like in the Trump administration?”

Friday, December 20, 2024

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Guest: Tony Pipa, Senior Fellow, Center for Sustainable Development, Global Economy and Development; Host, *Reimagine Rural* podcast

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DEWS: You’re listening to *The Current*, part of the Brookings Podcast Network, found online with our other public policy shows at Brookings dot edu slash podcasts. I’m Fred Dews.

This episode features a conversation on rural policy in America, both as the Biden administration winds down, and as the Trump administration prepares to take over the vast bureaucracy that administers federal rural programs throughout America.

Before I introduce you to my guest, I want to let you know that this is the 200th episode of *The Current*. Over the last five-plus years we’ve talked with scholars across Brookings about breaking news and relevant policy research, and I want to acknowledge the great work of my colleague and co-host Adrianna Pita, who started *The Current* and has done the majority of the interviews, 177 by my count. So, thank you Adrianna for your continued dedication to this show.

And now, to talk about rural policy now and going forward, I’m joined Tony Pipa, senior fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development, part of our Global Economy and Development program, and host of *Reimagine Rural*, the award-winning podcast where Tony visits rural towns across America, listening as local people tell the story of how they are enacting positive change in their communities and learning how public investment in rural people and places can lead to increased and equitable prosperity. I have the honor of producing the show and now welcoming you, Tony, to *The Current*!

PIPA: It’s great to be here, Fred. And congratulations to you and Adrianna on the 200th episode. And I’m honored to be here to mark that distinguished benchmark.

DEWS: Thank you, Tony. And do you want to hear something that really surprised me? This is the first time I have ever interviewed *you*. You've been on the *Brookings Cafeteria*, the podcast I used to host, in a special segment

PIPA: Right.

DEWS: But you have never been interviewed by Fred Dews.

PIPA: There you go. First time! I'm looking forward to it.

DEWS: So, were' here to talk about rural policy. But before we look ahead to the Trump administration, can you describe two or three of the top policy successes when you think about rural and the Biden administration?

[2:15]

PIPA: Well, the Biden administration actually made it a priority to invest in rural communities and their well-being. So, some of that was bureaucratic, even. They created the first ever position with an assistant to the president on rural affairs at the Domestic Policy Council at the White House, for example. And even the executive directive that the president signed the first day he was in office on equity called specifically out rural places as places that were underserved and that were needing investment. So first, just in terms of the policy direction, they made rural a priority. They made rural community economic development a priority.

Secondly, they really recognized the differences in capacity at the local level that rural communities have. Rural communities are often, you know, often have volunteer elected officials don't have a lot of staff in their local governments, sometimes don't have a great set of nonprofits around. And so, the Biden administration made it a priority to support that capacity in different ways. They launched a new initiative called the Rural Partners Network, which actually placed staff next to highly vulnerable rural communities so that they could help them navigate the federal system and look for investment in the federal system. It was a pilot program. It was in ten states, in selected communities in ten states. But it's indicative of this recognition that rural communities needed more support for capacity.

And there were other things like the the Intergovernmental Working Group on Coal affected Communities, which had rapid, rapid response teams that would work directly with rural communities, or the Economic Recovery Corps that was overseen by the Economic Development Administration that placed mid mid-career economic development specialists. And many of them were in rural places.

And then finally, just the legislation that was passed during the Biden administration: the Bipartisan Infrastructure law, the Inflation Reduction Act, the CHIPS and Science Act, a lot of that just enormous amount of investment opportunity for rural places. In fact, the research we did showed about \$464 billion worth of opportunities relevant to rural. And the combination of this priority setting by the administration itself and then actually having the money and the programs available for investments to be made available. I think you saw a big shift in the amount of investment that was actually going into rural communities.

DEWS: So, we started your podcast, *Reimagine Rural*, during the Biden administration, but it's going to continue in 2025 under the Trump administration. What's on your mind about how rural policy could change or not change with the new administration coming to Washington in about a month?

[5:13]

PIPA: Well, first and foremost is the extent to which the Trump administration continues to support the investments in the programs that were set up through the infrastructure law, through the Inflation Reduction Act, through the CHIPS and Science Act. You've already seen some questioning and back and forth of, you know, would you continue to make the investments that are being made through the CHIPS and Science Act? There's been some chatter about rolling back some of the money that's available in the Inflation Reduction Act. And a lot of that money is going to rural communities or rural communities that have a great deal of appetite for it. And so, the extent to which those resources will be available will be a question mark, and that will be something to watch closely.

Secondly, you know, there are some policies that the president-elect has committed to undertaking, things like instituting tariffs or potential mass deportations, which could have real impact, actually, on rural communities. Some of the main drivers of rural economies, like the rural health care economy or construction or agriculture, use a lot of foreign-born workers. And so, the extent to which immigration policy touches on, you know, that workforce that could have a lot of implications for the towns that we're visiting as we're hearing what they're trying to do.

At the end of the day, though, what we do in the podcast is we're hearing a lot from local people as they work together to try to solve those problems locally. And so, how the Trump administration intersects with state governments and then those state governments intersect with their local governments, that will have a lot of implications as well for what's happening in those local towns and the stories that we're collecting when we hear about what's going on locally.

And the final thing I would say is just the political climate overall, the extent to which people are willing to work together and kind of collaborate and create new civic infrastructure and new civic collaborations, no matter what's happening politically in Washington, D.C., I think is going to be really important for the health of the communities that we that we profile, that we visit in *Reimagine Rural*.

DEWS: Well, speaking of the communities you visited in the two seasons we've produced together, you've talked to almost 100 people in dozens of states across the country. Are you hearing from any of your contacts? Are you going from any of your contacts through the podcast or otherwise, the other work you do about what's on their minds about the incoming administration?

[7:54]

PIPA: Yeah, I think there is. I mean, going back to, you know, what will be available in terms of investment I think is on everybody's mind and the extent to which. Things also might change in Washington, right? We have the effort that's meant to be headed up by Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy, DOGE, which is looking to kind of make government more efficient. I think there's both a potential positive but also negative in all of that, right?

I think people find it hard in rural communities to be able to navigate the federal system, so they would love it to be more straightforward and effective and be able to find what it is they need. But secondly, if you just sort of deconstruct everything without building anew and making it better, then that's going to make it even worse.

And so, I think there's just a large question mark in people's minds about what's even going to be their relationship with Washington and who will they even be able to get to talk to in some really in in some sense as they're thinking about what's going to be really helpful for their own economic opportunities and and the changes in their social structures locally.

DEWS: Yeah. I wanted to to say that the monies that are being dispersed through these major federal programs, like the Bipartisan Infrastructure bill and the CHIPS and Science Act are flowing out to rural communities, but they're coming from Washington, D.C., from federal agencies, mostly in Washington, D.C. There's a chart on the Reimagining Rural Policy Initiative pages that I think has been described as a spaghetti chart of federal programs. I will put a link to it in the show notes. But and you mentioned Musk and Ramaswamy in their so-called "Department of Government Efficiency." What are you thinking in terms of how the inside Washington perspective, could impact the flow of those dollars? Rural communities want that money, but it's coming out of agencies in Washington that people in Washington, especially in the new administration, are talking about potentially cutting.

[10:05]

PIPA: Yeah. So, first off, even before we talk about Washington, keep in mind that there is a significant part of that \$464 billion that I talked about. Almost half of it is actually going to go through states and other intermediaries, right? So, it will be state governments that actually the local communities are trying to deal with. A good deal of that money has actually already moved to some of those intermediaries, or it will be like nonprofit consortia that will then be sub granting that money to local communities.

So, no matter what happens, even with the Republican administration bringing some of that money back or not making some of that money available, that hasn't yet been spent, there's actually still going to be a lot of investment available for local communities, not all of it even accessible via federal sources, but actually because it's actually already at the states and the states have to figure out how to allocate and appropriate it and spend it. The broadband money is a great example of that, for example, and a lot of that a lot of those kinds of investments are going to be really consequential for rural.

But as it relates to federal agencies, there's both the possibility that some of the money that was originally set aside may no longer be there to be spent. And that means then that rural communities are in a space that they were in, you know, five, six, seven years ago where they have these things that they would like to do that they need investment for, but now the pool of investment is more limited because you don't have those federal resources.

But secondly, even with something like DOGE, it also becomes uncertain if you're going to have the staff or the office or who you're even going to be dealing with with some programs, because things may shift, things may get consolidated. It's a it's a big question mark. Like, uncertainty is not your friend when you're looking to try to access federal investment because it's complicated enough already. And so, people changing jobs, offices, offices consolidating, systems being shifted, processes being shifted, all of that could make it even more difficult for rural communities to be able to access the kind of investment that they feel like they need.

DEWS: So, today, December 20th, happens to be the sixth anniversary of the last farm bill. The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018 was signed into law on this day in 2018. And it's supposed to be, by my understanding, an every-five years law, it's a major bill for—

PIPA: —Yes, we're already a year behind. Exactly.

DEWS: —all kinds of rural. So, we're a year behind, and I don't expect it to get passed by the expiring Congress. Tony, what impact does the lack of a renewed Farm Bill have on rural policy in America?

[13:07]

PIPA: Well, there certainly part of it is around foreign policy. Now, agriculture is just about 7% of the overall employment in rural economies across the country. So, it's a portion, but it's not ... we often make the mistake of thinking that agriculture dominates rural economies when it really it's not the dominant rural economy now. But it does have impacts and especially in some of those major farming communities in the Midwest and in California and otherwise. So, it's creating stress in those particular places where agriculture is a dominant community.

But part of the Farm Bill is also the rural development title of the farm bill, which is a lot of investment for water and sewer infrastructure, for broadband, for community facilities, for health care, for lots of different things in rural communities. And so, those programs are still a question mark because they haven't been reauthorized, because we haven't been able to pass a Farm Bill.

There was some bipartisan momentum in this particular Congress around even creating a new program that would invest in capacity, getting at those capacity needs that I talked about earlier. Both the Democratic chair, Senator Debbie Stabenow, and the ranking member of the Agricultural Committee, Senator John Boozman from Arkansas, had put those in their frameworks for the Farm Bill to create a new capacity building program that would get very flexible money, actually to partnerships at the local level for rural communities, which I think rural communities were very enthusiastic about.

That's now a question mark. Where does that live in a new Congress? And with the changed politics and and new senators and new House members coming in and and what to what extent does that even get some focus? Because it's a much smaller part of a larger a much larger bill which is focused on agricultural policy as well as nutrition programs like SNAP, the food stamps program, and nutrition in the schools and other things.

And so, that's become, I think, more uncertain and even by its very nature, the Farm Bill has to be bipartisan. You just need that many members to be able to pass it. And so, what the politics of that will look like in the new Congress, I think, is at this point to be determined that that's a bit of a question mark and makes it more uncertain for the kinds of things that from the rural development perspective, people were really excited about.

DEWS: So, final question for you, Tony, and back to the *Reimagine Rural* podcast. We are planning to do season 3 in 2025. I'm very excited to work with you again on that. How are you thinking about the new season, and are you thinking about it a different way than had Vice President Harris won the election?

[16:09]

PIPA: I don't know that we're thinking about it in a different way. I think we'll I think we'll approach it similarly. We want it to remain place based, i.e., we want to capture the stories of local people who are working together to create progress in their town and to envision a better future and to be able to make progress towards that future. How that that path from now to their future happens? There may be different different dimensions because of the policy priorities that an incoming Trump administration is going to have versus what might have happened with an incoming Harris administration.

So, I think we'll see some different dynamics. You know, civic dynamics at the local level. I think will see just different policy decisions that are being made in Washington have effect at the local level. And we'll get to hear firsthand about how that's impacting people in their local communities.

But I think overall, we're going to stick with with what we've been trying to do, which is enable local people to tell their stories; show how change happens in a smaller place; how important civic structures are for that happening; and also touch on some of the major themes about what's kind of defining life in rural places. And some of that's going to continue to be housing. It's going to, you know, health care, education. Some things that we haven't gotten too deeply into yet. And and it's also going to continue to be things like we have touched upon already: the energy economy, broadband, those kinds of things as well.

DEWS: Well, Tony, I really look forward to getting started working on that show with you and our colleagues early in the new year for launch sometime in 2025. And listeners, you can find past episodes of *Reimagine Rural* on our website at Brookings dot edu slash reimagine rural podcast. And Tony, you usually say that but now I get to say it. It's been great talking with you, and I hope you have a happy holidays and a happy New Year.

PIPA: Well, thanks for having me, Fred. Happy holidays to you and to everyone listening. And thanks to you for all the work and the great guidance and and what you've been able to do in helping us produce re-imagined rural. It's just been a labor of love and it's been a joy to work in partnership with you on it.

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