

You Don't Know America
OR
How Community Triumphs Over Soccer Moms and Red and Blue States in the 21st
Century U.S.

Adapted from the Patchwork Nation talk at TEDx MidAtlantic 2011.

I'm a journalist, have been for 20 years and that time has taken me around the United States often to more far-flung locales. On my journeys I've had the pleasure of talking to a lot of different kinds of people, seeing a lot of places and eating at a lot of diners.

And if you drink enough bad coffee in enough diners you begin to notice there are likenesses and differences in American communities that we as journalists understand intuitively, but that we don't know how to report on. We fall back on talking about the problems of every place as if they are one-of-a-kind or we draw sweeping parallels about problems in "America."

Every four years we are presented with a presidential election to cover and our two-party political system combined the reporting apparatus that exists pushes journalists to create an oversimplified view of America.

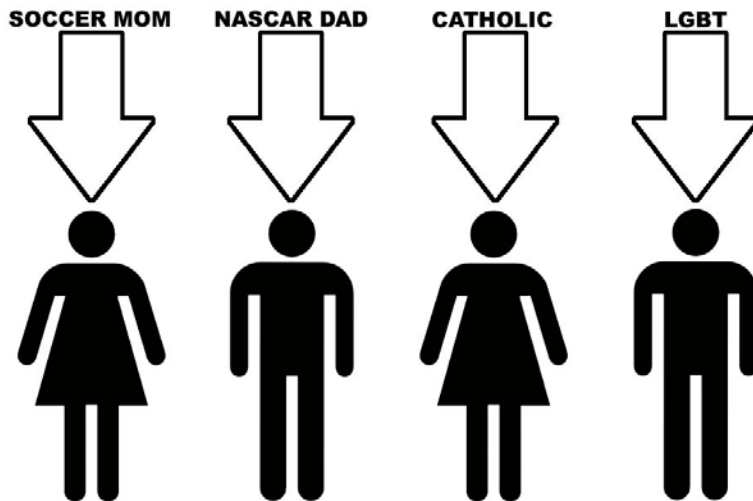


That image is the view from blue America, of course. In red America they could create a similar map with labels that say things like "Common Sense People" in the red areas and maybe "Godless Socialists" in the other. The US is a complicated place and that shorthand understanding does none of us any good. Our contemporary breakdowns of the country are based on a few myths.

Myth 1: Place doesn't matter. We are all demographic types that are easily identifiable no matter where we live. We think about people 18-24 or African

Americans or women. And we do this implying there is such a thing a woman vote – as if women are all the same.

When you divorce the communities you look at from places you essentially look at them on a white background.



We know this is wrong. I think we all know that isn't true. The people you see, the economy you live, the traffic you suffer through, the places you eat and drink, the activities you do for fun. These things all have a big impact in how you see the world.

So to compensate, we in journalism fall back on the familiar blue and red model. And the problem with that model isn't just that there are red (conservative) parts of New York and blue (liberal) parts of Texas, it also creates stereotypes of what those red and blue places are like.

Consider Detroit, the hulking struggling industrial center of Michigan is a deep blue, but so is young, educated wealthy Ann Arbor which sits just some 30 minutes away.

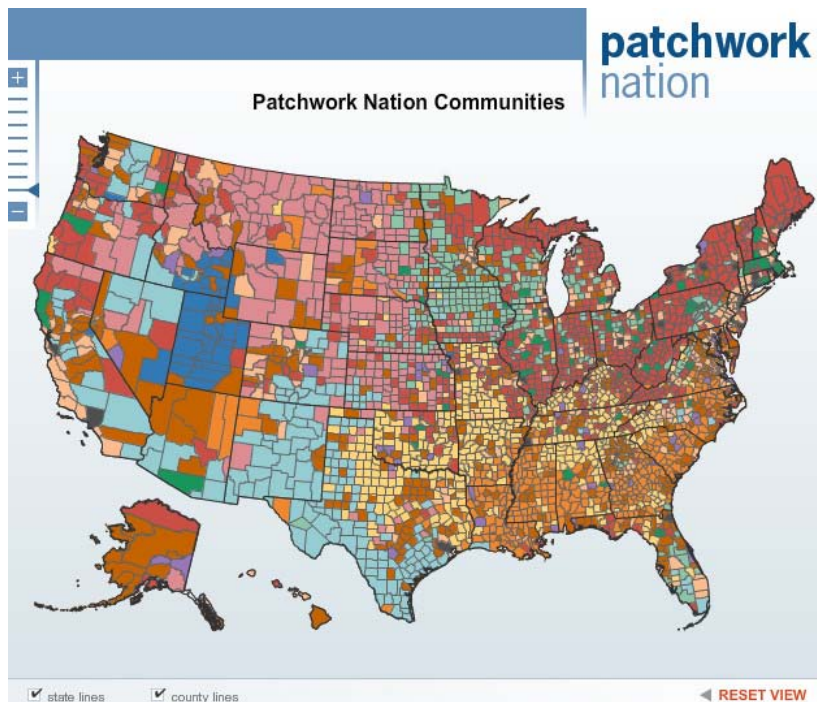


And on the frozen north-Midwestern plains, Fargo is pretty Red, but so is wealthy, plastic-surgery-enhanced Orange County California.



The bottom line is this red and blue that we have come to know so well every four years is fine for keeping score on election night, but it doesn't work for much else. This sense of community is much too broad. There are many different kinds of Red communities and Blue communities.

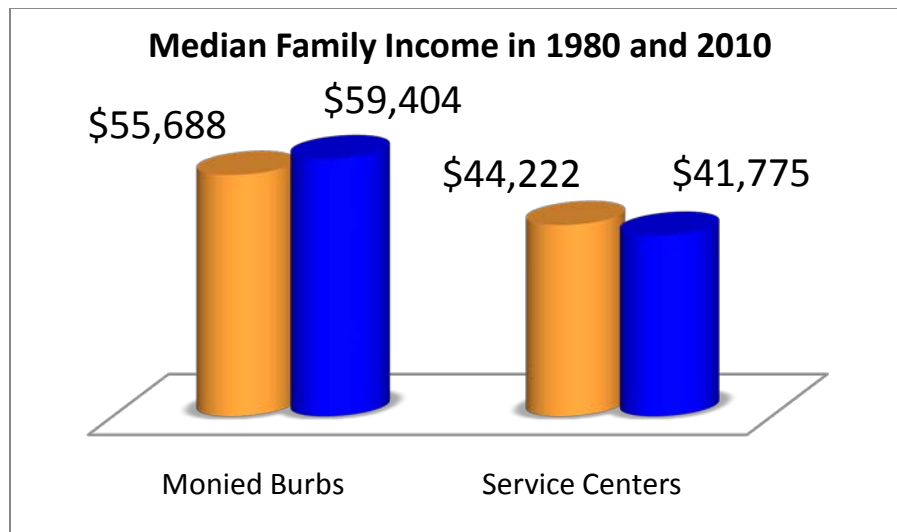
That's why, four years ago, I worked with academics to create this map and tool called Patchwork Nation. With it we took every bit of demographic data we could get about every county in the country – age, race, income levels, occupations – and used it to break those counties into 12 different types of place: everything from big city Industrial Metros like Detroit to rural agricultural communities we call Tractor Country.



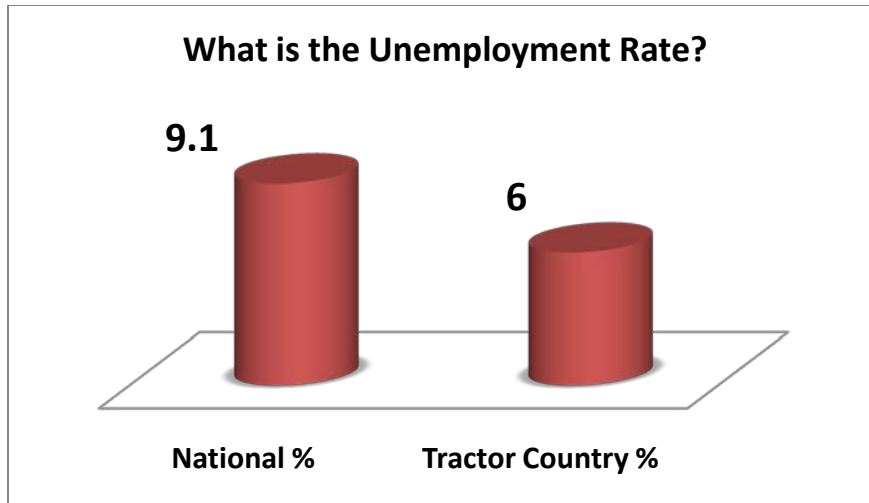
I visit 12 real places that fit these 12 communities. They are my real-life checks on data crunching.

And when you look at the country this way you begin to see the challenges the country faces in a whole new way. The country isn't just going through a recession, it is changing. And those changes have very different ramifications for the different communities on this map and the places I visit.

Consider, the small town Service Worker Centers and wealthy Monied Burbs. The large-scale economic changes of the last 30 years have had dramatically different impacts on them. The Burbs have actually done OK, seeing their incomes rise in real terms over that period. The Service Worker Centers are struggling. The current recession has only made the pain sharper.



Meanwhile, the rural agricultural counties we call Tractor Country really have not seen much pain in this recession at all. Their economy, based on agriculture, means they have not experienced the same spike in foreclosures that came with the housing boom and certainly not the same problems with unemployment.



I could go on and on talking about the meanings of these differences and their impacts on a changing a changing country. There are scores of examples. But the primary point is this: place still matters in America – even in the age of Twitter and iPads.

All these places in Patchwork Nation want and need different things as the United States and the globe changes. Patchwork Nation and our breakdown of the country is by no means perfect – no breakdown is. But it is more complete and more real than the ways we, especially we in the media, think about community in America. More real than red and blue states and soccer moms and NASCAR dads.

After four years with Patchwork Nation, I think we are really just beginning, because the biggest changes for the country are still to come. The country is in for dramatic shifts in the next few years economically, culturally and, ultimately, politically. Populism and populist movements are growing and the lines between winners and losers in our new reality are growing more pronounced.

Ignoring the differences in these different American communities is a mistake. They can't be steamrolled over. They won't be steamrolled over.

Place and community still matter in America. And as we enter a period of dramatic change, we will need to better understand what those words really mean in the 21st Century.