Research question: What factors influence whether rural Arkansans participate in elections?

General Info on Rural Arkansas 2023 ARKANSAS CIVIC HEALTH INDEXTM

- Arkansas has some of the highest rates of poverty in the country—this is worsened because of Arkansas' increased rurality.
- Rural residents make up % of Arkansas' population and face higher rates of poverty and ill health
- There is currently an unprecedented divide between rural and urban areas

Tentative Categories:

1. Political Efficacy - the belief that one's voice matters in politics and that individual or collective civic action can actually influence the government's action
    a. Internal Efficacy - a person's belief in their own ability to understand political processes
        i. Do rural Arkansans believe their votes matter?
        ii. Some rural Arkansans believe that online voting machines alter their votes
            1. Concerns about the 2020 election have spiraled, perpetuating the belief of many rural voters that their votes do not matter because of rampant "election fraud."
        iii. Ultimately very low in rural Arkansas
    b. External Efficacy - the belief that political authorities and government institutions will respond to citizens' demands and care about their needs
        i. This is low to moderate across ALL Arkansas voters
2. Political Trust - the belief that political actors and institutions will act in the best interest of citizens and uphold their values
    a. Across the state
        i. Only 35% of Arkansas voters reported trusting the federal government in Washington at least half of the time, compared to the national average of 46%
        ii. Voters' trust in others is well below the national average, ranking 49 out of 50 states and DC
    b. Rural residence and rural place-based identity are associated with a lower trust in the federal government
        i. This relationship has been observed during both Republican and Democratic presidencies, though rural America overwhelmingly favors Republican candidates
        ii. Effects/Examples:
            1. Rural areas did not accept COVID-19 vaccines as much as their urban counterparts
    c. Trust in the media is extremely low across Arkansas, and is worsened in rural areas
    d. Key: Rural voters feel left behind and don't see the Democratic party as receptive to their needs
3. Practical Barriers
    a. Civic Deserts - areas with few accessible institutions, opportunities for engagement, and weak organizational infrastructure
        i. Across the country, 60% of rural millennials live in civic deserts
        ii. The lack of infrastructure translates into a lower voter turnout
    b. Geographic Isolation

        i. Long distances to polling locations coupled with a lack of transportation result in decreased turnout.
    c. Limited Broadband Access
        i. Broadband - internet services
        ii. Rural Arkansas lacks broadbands due to costs and low population density
            1. ROI issue
    d. Economic and Labor Demands
        i. Many individuals
    e. Educational Access and Civic Preparation
4. Political Information and Communication
    a. Broadcast media is a significant source of information, however, many respondents believed that most broadcast media was too biased to be deemed legitimate. Broadcast news is significant in evaluating a candidate's characteristics.
    b. The most frequent type of print media was magazines, however most local magazines are owned by larger corporations, which some feel is biased.
        i. This leaves many seeking out news sources that align with their own values.
    c. 62% of Arkansas eligible voters have little to no trust that the media reports news fairly, accurately, and fully.
5. Community Identity and Political Culture
    a. Low rates of civic organization membership as well as neighbor to neighbor cooperation
    b. Core aspects of rural communities are family and cultural pride
6. Perceptions of Candidates and Government
    a. Candidates who align with conservative social values often outperform Democrats, as the Democrats face deep loathing and distrust in rural areas
    b. Voters display populist leanings and frequently prioritize the preservation of family farms and local job creation
    c. Many rural voters are highly suspicious of election integrity, often believing that their votes are altered due to the machines
    d. High visibility federal election candidates face more scrutiny

Interview with Dorotha Love Hall

- Could you tell me about yourself and your work?
    - Executive director of Destination Transformation, a nonprofit from Southeast Arkansas several years ago
    - Mission: empower educate, inform,and transform lives of rural individuals and communities
    - Former senior public health advisor for CDC in Kenya
    - Focuses when working with civic education: register people to vote, educate them about the importance of voting, and to mobilize them to vote.
    - During a meeting, most people who showed up were registered. But they discussed the importance of voting. Most agreed that it helped for them to vote
        - "But there's also a few that said, well, you know, I don't feel like my vote really makes a difference. And so, it takes time to go out and vote, if they don't have transportation, and that's been listed as one of the issues. One of the challenges of areas that you're not able to get to the pool. But I think probably the most frequent response is that my one vote is not gonna make any difference."
    - EXAMPLE:
        - Election for Sheriff in Southeast Arkansas
        - One Sheriff was able to win, despite a popular notion that he might be able to, because of some bad publicity. He still won by a few votes. People said they were surprised, but they also talked to several who didn't vote.
    - Barriers:
        - "The one thing that I'd heard previously was that they just don't feel like their vote is really gonna make a difference. They feel that they don't have a lot of control, and they feel that even though a lot of them are primarily minorities, that the few people in control are the ones who will win, and so they don't feel they can make a difference."
        - "There's no reason why if transportation is an issue, that won't be an issue in November. So, a lot going on, but again, all interrelated, goes to, first of all, the importance of self expression, being able to acknowledge where we are, and what our capacity is as a citizen. Understanding what happens at city hall meetings, understanding the chamber of commerce, and how impactful young people can be, if they're working to help improve the situation in their communities."
        - Believes they can overcome anything if they work together

Civic Participation

- Do you think most people feel connected to their government?
    - "They [young people] understand from attending the city council meeting, they expressed concerns about the leadership, that they didn't feel like the people there were really representing them. I shared with them an experience that my husband and I had when we talked to them about putting a home over on the west side of town, and was actually told by people in the marriage office that they didn't have any laws for the west side of town, but if people wanted to go to a house on the east side, which is where predominantly white is, then there are a lot of rules and guidelines that have to be followed. So those

kinds of comments kind of help them to understand that they need to be able to speak up for themselves."
    - "So I think just if we can figure out a way to help people to understand the relevance to them, and maybe also have to understand the bigger picture."
    - "Now, maybe you don't feel like your vote alone makes a difference, but if you're working with a collective majority, it can make a big difference. And so trying to get people to work more together, more collaboratively collectively to make some changes in our communities. I don't feel like they feel connected to the federal government at all. They feel like that's kind of out of their hands. And initially, they didn't really feel connected to the local government. They didn't know who the mayor was. They didn't know who the city council members were."
- When people try to vote, what practical obstacles do they face?
    - "Besides the transportation, the fact of the locations of the polls, you know, that they're not really conducive to people. They don't really have a precinct at the area close to them, which, again, involves transportation, but just saying, you know, but there was discussion about not using that one or something. But it's just the location of the post, the transportation."
    - "People have a little bit of lackadaisa, about just voting, because they've not been able to see any, I guess, positive results from their voting. So those are the barriers that were usually presented in discussions that we've had."
- For people who do vote, do you think that they feel like their vote does make a difference?
    - "I think they do, because they do take the initiative to go and vote. And they say they do it because they feel they're supposed to vote."
    - "The ones that were in attendance, that we talked to, they feel that they should vote, because someone has told them that they should, again, I don't think they are totally convinced that it makes a difference, so it's not like top priority on their list, but something that they will do, if don't have anything else to do, or no other conflicts or something. They've been really nonchalant about it, and I didn't ask the question, and I haven't been able to go back and review a brief survey that I did."
    - "They know they're supposed to go vote, some of them don't know where to go, don't know the location, it's out of the area they didn't have a ride. It wasn't as important as something else they had to do. So, it's just their perspective on the importance of it, and whether or not it's gonna make a difference."
- What role does access to the internet play?
    - "A perfect example would be in Dumas, they had a mayor, and that mayor ran a second term, was not elected. And I actually had her come in and speak to one of our workshops, but she was not elected. The person they elected was just someone they happened to know because they were a coach in the city where people played ball. And so the parents now just voted for it. They didn't look at what the candidate offered or promised or what their platform was, that was never important. People vote based on who they know, and that, again, goes back to the election they had earlier this year, where most people really thought they would vote against this person, and he was voted in, in spite of a lot of negative publicity because that person associates with the community, and they've seen him, they know him, even though they recognize it, you know, he's not really concerned

about the community, even though, I guess he gives, they think maybe he is, I guess, because he comes around. But to answer your question, I think they basically vote on who they know. The familiarity. If they know the name, and they'll both know. I don't think any of them, there were probably a third said they actually try to understand what the candidate is gonna do. And so we talked to them about the importance, I mean, this is the time where you can be selfish, and you find out, what are you going to do for us, for me? And you should hold them to that. If they don't they should be voted out of office. My kids and some of them, when they were like, "Can we get rid of this guy?"

- "We've just got to be more creative and find different ways to let people know the importance of their voice and how collectively, you know, both individually and collectively, we can make some changes. And you mentioned the internet and researching and knowing the candidates. Again, so I've been on what's familiar to them. Not what they promised to do, because I had one candidate say I didn't promise anything. I'm like, but you ran. Well, you know, I was told I should run. I didn't promise anything. So when you have your leader, who's in a position who makes a statement like that, uh, he himself, obviously, feels that people will elect me because they know my name. So I don't have to promise anything."
- "And it's like people get what they get when they don't take the time to learn what this person is doing, or, you know, maybe we can do more, um what they call it, not debates, but more information sessions to bring the candidates together and to try to encourage people to come out and hear what they are promising to do for the community. I think that's one thing that we've talked about doing more of. Because I think just on their own people may not do a lot of research, but if we could figure out a way to kind of bring it to them, and give the candidates a platform, we might be able to get people out and listen."

Perryville Interviewee 1 — Small Business Owner

1. What is the biggest challenge facing your community right now?
    a. “Ignorance.”
2. Do you think people in Washington—or even Little Rock—understand what life is like here?
    a. “Pretty sure they have an idea of what’s going on in here.”
3. How easy is it to access healthcare when you need it?
    a. “It’s not that hard.”
    b. “I took the drive to Conway when my wife was pregnant because it was the closest place to deliver a baby. It’s about 25-28 miles.”
4. Are there enough jobs and opportunities for young people here?
    a. “No.”
5. Do you usually vote in elections?
    a. “Yes I do.”
6. What makes it easier or harder for people around here to vote?
    a. “I don’t think people here care. So, like back to our main problem, which is ignorance. They just don’t care.”
7. Why do you think they don’t care?
    a. “Because it’s the same people with the same jobs and nothing’s going to change.”
    b. “Cause they don’t think it matters. It’s like the same people coming back.”
8. Do you feel like your vote makes a difference in elections?
    a. “I always hope that it’s gonna make a difference or not.”
9. Where do you get your information about elections and candidates?
    a. “I mean there’s a lot of talk on the streets, Facebook, news. I own a restaurant, so people talk to me in the restaurant to discuss stuff with me.”
10. Do you think local elected officials listen to the people of Perry County?
    a. “No. No.”
11. Why not?
    a. “Because if they listen, this country would be much better. Much, much better.”
12. How far are polling locations from you?
    a. “I can walk over there in like one minute.”
13. What gives you hope for the future of Perry County?
    a. “There’s people that are coming into the county that are willing to spend money and make things better and invest in this country. I’m one of them. I will try my best. We’re trying to make a change.”
14. Do you think Perry County’s community is strong?
    a. “Oh no. No. Now, go to Facebook and watch all that drama. And I guess that kind of plays into why people don’t want to vote. Let me tell you something. For example, the Chamber of Commerce comes and they want to do an event. Right? Brilliant event. It should get tourists from everywhere. They mess it up because people in this county just don’t want anybody to do anything because everybody’s jealous of everybody.
15. Issues in the county?
    a. “Lots of corruption.” On the local level.
16. Have they prioritized small businesses in Perry County or not at all?

a. “On no. Oh no. I'll tell you how many issues we had. I mean, we tried to set fireworks in downtown Perryville at our expense and they shut us down.”
b. “But there’s a lot of stuff that we try to do to make this place better. And every time we try to do something, like there’s lots of shutting us down.” Clarified that it was on purpose.

Perryville Interviewee 2 — 3 young adults at the park

1. What's an issue in the community?
    a. “This, like, sounds stupid, but, like obviously, we’re small towns, so like everybody knows everybody’s stuff. And so, like it’s kind of toxic in a way.”
        i. Mostly on social media and the town facebook page.
2. Do you feel like people in Washington, or even Little Rock understand what life is like here?
    a. “No. It’s just a small little country town. And, like, even if you have money you don’t act like it. Like usually people around here are humble.”
3. How far do you have to drive for medical care?
    a. “On average, I drive like 30 mins to an hour for medical care. Have little doctors’ offices but nothing to treat trauma. The closest one is Conway.”
4. Do you think there’s enough jobs and opportunities for young people?
    a. “No. Pizza pro, Harps, Big stone. Yeah, no.”
5. Do you usually vote in elections? Why or why not? (Asked to the male who was registered)
    a. “No. I just don’t think that would really make a difference to me, and I don’t have the time.”
6. Why don’t you want to register? (Asked to the 21 year old who said she wasn’t registered)
    a. “I just never did…I never found the time.”
7. Are there barricades that prevent people from voting?
    a. “No.”
    b. “I don’t think people care. Yeah it’s never really been a big deal here.”
8. Do you think local elected officials listen to people in Perry County?
    a. “No.”
    b. Has a dirt road which she complained about to the Perry County judge and nothing happened
9. What gives you hope about the future of Perry county, if anything?
    a. “Um…really? Nothing. It’s kind of sad ‘cause like, most people, like in school and stuff just talk about getting ready to leave. And so that’s just kind of a lot. I feel like it’s getting worse.”
    b. “Like, both of our elementary and high schools like every year it’s, like a new set. Like there’s probably, what 10 new hires this year? There’s been like 10 people quit in just elementary school this year?”
    c. “Our superintendent left after one year. And our last girl, she was here for two and then just left.”
    d. “It's a lot of older people that are voting in this county. It’s what this county is.”

Perryville Interviewee 3 — mother at the park

1. What do you think the biggest challenge is in Perry County?
    a. “Food, starvation, drugs for this country, that’s what it’s becoming.”
2. Do you feel like the people in Washington or Little Rock understand what life is like here?
    a. “Oh, I no, I don't know. No, no, no.”
3. How easy is it to access healthcare when you need it?
    a. “A little difficult, but it’s okay.”
4. How far have you had to drive for medical care?
    a. “Maybe an hour. An hour and a half.”
5. Do you usually vote in elections?
    a. “Uh, no. I don’t ever vote. What’s the point? It's not like when you vote or something, you're actually gonna get it, and the government’s all.
6. Reasons people don’t vote?
    a. “Everything’s paid.”
7. “I feel like it used to be a good, quiet town, but now it’s like a lot of drugs. And it seems like not too many people do anything about it. And you see a lot of homeless people, they live over there in the woods.”
8. Does not think local elected officials listen to people in Perry.
9. What gives you hope for the future
    a. “Um…well I hope for change, but I don’t see that changing.”
    b. When asked about the younger generation: “I think this area is teaching our kids more about sex and drugs and that it's okay to have a baby at this young age.”
10. Is there a lot of political hostility?
    a. “Yes. We see cops every day, up and now.”
    b. “A lot of the cops have left. We get new ones, and …we don’t really know them that well. They try to do the best they can, but I feel like drugs just for this little area have taken over.”

Perryville Interviewee 4 — Scott Skinkel, soon to be Perry County Judge

1. Tell me about yourself and Perry County.
    a. “Been in the justice department at Perry County. Been there for 19 years and 10 months.
2. What do you think the biggest challenge is?
    a. “The revenue that’s in this county, we don't have much revenue, we’re a poor county.
3. Do you think people in Washington or even LR understand what life is like here?
    a. “Not unless they’ve been there. I don't think they do.”
4. How easy is it to access healthcare here when you need it?
    a. “We’ve got two medical places." Not long drives to him.
5. Do you think there's enough jobs and opportunities for you people
    a. “Not really. There’s not much here. I mean there's a couple of grocery stores, water companies, and an electric company."
6. Do you usually vote in elections? Why or why not?
    a. “Yes, because I think my voice needs to be heard.”
7. What makes it easier or harder for people to vote?
    a. “I think the early voting helps make it easier on a lot of folks.”
8. Do you think local elected officials listen to people in Perry County?
    a. “Yes.”
    b. On young people voting: “They refuse to register.” “Not sure why.”
9. What gives you hope about the future?
    a. “I don’t know.”
10. Do you think the community is strong?
    a. “Yeah. You know we’ve got senior adult centers for the seniors to come in.”

Perryville Interviewee 5 — Lesley Nalley

1. Tell me about yourself
    a. My parents came from Italy and settled in Little Italy which is at the edge of Perry and Pulaski County. In 1915. So my family's been here from that time, and I started serving on the quorum court in January."
2. What do you think the biggest challenge facing your community is right now?
    a. "I don't know. It's a poor county, overall. We have a lot of natural resources, a lot of assets. But, you know, we don't have a lot of jobs."
3. Do you think people in Washington or LR understand what life is like here?
    a. "Some of them."
4. Is it easy to access healthcare when you need it?
    a. "I think so." Has to go to Conway or Little Rock, which she says is a 20 minute drive.
5. Do you vote in elections?
    a. "Yes always. I mean people fought and died for the right to vote so…"
6. What makes it easier or harder for people to vote?
    a. "I would say mobility. We have a lot of rural areas. We have a lot of elderly and homebound folks. You know we don't have a public transit system, so I would just say mobility would be my answer."
7. Do you think local elected officials listen to the people in Perry County?
    a. "Just like every county, I think some do. I think all of them want what's best for their home. But I think they attempt to."
8. Why do young people feel disconnected from voting / politics?
    a. "A lack of reaching out to them."
    b. "You know, you were at our quorum court meeting. Very few people are there, right? Some of that is just personal responsibility and some of that is a lack of reach out, but especially like meeting people where they are."
    c. Acknowledges that young people can feel like outsiders in political spaces which is why it's so important for them to be met where they are.
9. What gives you hope for the future of Perry County?
    a. "The people. I mean the people are amazing. They're resilient. They love this place."
    b. Says there are a lot of families that have been here for years and years. And that people are very active in their communities.
    c. "Perry County's pretty politically active, depending on the race." More active in local races.
10. What can encourage people to vote?
    a. "Meeting people where they are. Communicating it in different ways, making it easy to vote."
    b. Social media, like tik tok and stuff
    c. "I think voting is boring. Like, voting, you know, for the average person it's like 'why does it matter? Why does my vote matter? You know you have a lot of that. So I think people tend to just be busy with life. And don't see the importance of it."

Perryville Interviewee 6 — anonymous man outside of quorum court

1. Tell me about yourself
    a. Family has lived in Perry County since 1976.
2. Issue facing your community?
    a. “Lack of revenue.”
3. Do people in Washington and little rock understand what life is like here
    a. “You know, there’s a lot of state and federal politicians that are pretty active here in Perry County.”
4. Is it easy to access healthcare when you need it?
    a. “Yes.”
5. Do you usually vote in elections? Why or why not?
    a. “Yes. Because I believe it’s important for us. This is a representative democracy. I think one problem in our country is, it’s not being utilized in that fashion. So, uh, I think it’s important for us to communicate that, uh it’s important for people to get out their polls and express and vote that way.”
6. What makes it harder for people to vote?
    a. I think the election commission here does a good job.
    b. “Everybody’s given an opportunity to go to a polling place that’s close to them, and uh the county has improved from services out in the western part of the county.”
    c. Thinks they're doing a good job for elections
7. Why do you think voter turnout is so low especially amongst the young?
    a. “I think there’s a, uh, problem, uh, generation problem. Um, but between, huh some disconnect, uh uh, the older generations and the younger generation, how we bridge that gap I'm not exactly sure.”
8. Do you think local elected officials listen to poe;le in Perry County?
    a. “Yes.”

Perryville Interviewee 7 — Anonymous Elected Official

1. What is the biggest challenge facing your community right now?
    a. “A lack of infrastructure that produces revenue to make the county function, we struggle with revenue to pay the employees, to maintain the roads, just a lack of revenue for the county because we don’t have any large manufacturing plants or storage or anything to generate tax revenue.”
2. Do you think people in Little Rock understand what life is like there?
    a. “Absolutely not. They can’t imagine, they can’t imagine having to drive 30-45 minutes to go to Walmart.”
3. How easy is it to access healthcare when you need it?
    a. “Extremely difficult. We have one county health department that has a nurse on duty, but on average, most people go to Little Rock or Conway for medical care. So you’re looking at driving 45 minutes on average, one way just to go to a doctor or hospital.”
4. Do you feel like there are enough jobs and opportunities for young people?
    a. “Absolutely not. It's very difficult to even find a job in Perry County. Most people go to Conway, Little Rock, or Morrilton to work.”
5. Do you usually vote in elections, why or why not?
    a. “Yes I do. It’s important that you determine who’s going to be making the decisions for you.”
6. What makes it easier or harder for people in Perry County to vote?
    a. “The hardest part is we’re very rural, and so some people have to drive 6 or 8 miles just to go to the voting precinct. So it’s not like an easy trip. You have to plan it, so the polling places are spread out all over the county because we’re so rural. So the distance some people have to travel makes it the most difficult when it comes to voting opportunities.”
7. Where do you think people in Perry County get information about elections and candidates?
    a. “Unforautnely, from social media, mostly facebook.”
8. Why do young people there not vote?
    a. “Because they’re younger, and you don’t fully understand and appreciate things till you get a few years of age under your belt.”
9. How much outreach do people do to Perry County?
    a. Not very successful at all. There's very little of that that goes on. People do their own thing and let everything just go the way it goes.
10. What has your election commissioner done?
    a. “Just, um, I guess, encouraging constituents to vote. I don't know if the election commission has done anything. They have their other struggles, the biggest struggle they have is just trying to find enough people to be poll workers before an election.
11. What barricades do you think people living in more rural parts of the country face when they want to vote, but they can’t?
    a. “The biggest is just getting to the polling places, getting to the, the precinct is out, is just depending on you know, they may not have a car or they may not drive anymore. So it just carries what they have to do to get there.”
12. What gives you hope about the future of Perry County?
    a. “I really don’t know because I’m really more worried about the county because, uh, I see that there’s not gonna be, in the next decade, I don't see an influx of tax revenue coming

in from any particular source. And I think the county's going to struggle to pay bills and keep employees because I don't know that we're going to be able to keep up with inflation because I don't see an influx of tax revenue coming, so instead of hope, I am more worried that it's going to get where it's going to be very difficult just to keep the county operational."

Interview with Shekeena Brown, McGee, Arkansas

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and how long you've lived in the Delta?
    a. "I'm Shekeena Brown, I have been living here in the Delta for all my life. I came here to McGee, Arkansas after I left the foster care system when I lived in Derimar, Arkansas. Ever since then, I've been up here since the time I grew up."
    b. "I graduated from McGee High School in 2011." She's a stay at home mom.
    c. "I didn't plan on wanting to be home all the time because I know my kids are soon to be grown. Hopefully soon, you know, I've been slowly but surely trying to find myself, I think basically I probably got too comfortable, and my aunt, she's an activist. And Little Rock, and you hear in Monticello, she's part of the NAACP in Monticello as well. I'm actually shocked that I was interested, you know? And ever since then, and there's been some years now, ever since then, I've been more interested in how important it is to get out and vote and encourage other people to vote as well, and making a difference in the communities and standing up and fighting for the better resources on the ground here in our communities, not just here in Mcgee, but also in local areas."
    d. "I want to say maybe a few years ago, I could be wrong. It was like a few murders down here. Year, um, and they, the person that supposedly did it, well he's in prison now, and it's just that, I don't know, it's different stuff, and they say that, and also here McGee, it's like a lot of abandoned buildings here, where we, you know kids, it can be made into a skating ring, but every time you look up, it's made into some kind of construction building. So they build more stuff for grownups, but not for children. You know, like, of course, they have, like summer programs and at one point in time, they was talking about a teen center here. Boys and Girls Club. They closed that down. It's no longer. So high schoolers don't even have nowhere to go or middle schoolers don't even have nowhere to go after school."
    e. "I am pretty sure that building bridges costs a whole lot of money, you know, 1,000,000s of dollars, you know? And if you got all this money to replace a bridge and letting businesses, and this is, and this is me just saying, because I don't know the people that is, his name, I forgot his name, but it's more Arabians coming down here and building businesses in our local areas, but no one is trying to help. People who already live here to try to get a business. You know, every time I look up, it's a small business going on. Uh, well, we actually just got a spa business where they um where it's like somewhere uptown somewhere. But it's like a very small building. And I'm like, I have been up here ever since I was 14 years old. And to me, honestly, I don't, I haven't seen any kind of major change. And with the bridge, we, the bridge, was supposed to be replaced years ago. Years and years ago, and they just now getting that done as much money as people spend coming through McGee, whether they're coming out of town or live here. From Walmart to Save Mart to Subway to Sonic. But it's a problem,like, just say for instance, like it's me as a black African-American. Like, if I was working and had major job businesses and stuff like that. But the white caucasian man, he can just go in there and ain't got to write a whole stack of papers just to get along. But as a black, but as a black woman, this could be anywhere, you know, and there's a black woman, or even a black man, we gotta write down so much stuff and fill out so much paperwork before a person

ever even gets a lan from the bank. So it's like a lot of stuff that I know that I feel could be changed."

f. "And like now they're requiring all and this whole state of Arkansas for public schools, they are requiring all high school students from ninth to 12th to have 75 hours of community service before they even graduate. And you know what? I get the fact that they're trying to teach them how to work before leaving school, but that's actually not putting them in a good position either way because if they don't get the community service hours, then you're gonna help hold them back. That's actually selling them. That's not helping them move forward."
g. "You know, and they didn't even think about before they put this law into passing that children of low income parents, they don't have rides like that . And people who aren't volunteers in the community, they need to get to enjoy their life too. They shouldn't have to come around all the time when someone has a child. Um, they should have made that. The number one priority is to get children the transportation that they need or even find them something for them to do. McGee Arkansas is not very big. There's only so many community service hours you can do here in McGee. Because it ain't that many businesses, you know and stuff like that. And don't even get me started on the roads."
h. "You know if you become a mayor and he's also on the school board. Now, when I research that, it says that it's sort of like a conflict of interest, I believe. Year, so he, he, that's my thing, but supposedly it's another person running against him. And hopefully we can get him out of there, because I mean, if no one runs against him, then he gets to, you know, be the mayor again, forever. So, and I just, I think it's time for a new mayor, because, um, it's just nothing being done, really basically done here. Yeah, I mean, and I don't even have to go out of the house to know all these things. It's big as social media is today, you know? Um, and not just with me, it's nothing being done, really, basically down here. Year I mean, and I don't even have to go out of the house to know all these things. It's big as social media is today, you know? Um and not just with me it's like uh fairness and discipline in our students at the school."
i. "I just signed a petition. Uh, not even probably two weeks ago where they are trying to take away our right to petition. And I just, I'm gonna fight hard for that, because the petition, and then they also need to actually let the petitions go through. So, it's a lot of stuff."
j. "It can be better in so many buildings, ma'am. When I tell you, it's so many buildings that can be done for kids to have, just like a youth facility where mental health is being taken care of. It would been a skating rink, you know, inside stuff for them to do through the summer. Like we had a pool here. The pool got closed down. They just let it go to waste. Big green algae, all that funky stuff, all up inside the pool now. They just let it go to waste. Yeah."

Interview with Rep. Vaught

1. What are the biggest obstacles that keep people from voting in rural Arkansas?
    a. “Probably for the elderly, it might be transportation. I don’t really have that issue in my district. Everybody goes and votes. It’s kind of hard for me to answer when I know my people are going and voting. Uh, I would probably, if I was gonna say, I would think transportation is a big deal for probably a lot of people. Working families, I probably just…in reality they work two to three jobs and they probably find it hard to find time to go do it. And then some people will be, they just don’t know who to vote for or what the issues are about.”
2. Do you see an apathetic attitude amongst the youth in your community?
    a. “Probably so. Because perception is reality. And perception is, they’ve heard it for years, if their vote doesn’t matter, so why take the time to go do it?
3. In your experience, how does trust in government or the election process influence whether people choose to vote?
    a. “Because again, perception, media, and we don’t have secure elections or they read it on Twitter, Facebook, TikTok. You know, I think it’s gonna depend on where you get your information from as to whether you believe it’s secure or not.”
4. Where do you think most people in your area get their information about elections and candidates?
    a. “This is gonna sound dumb, probably my Facebook page. Uh, I would say my area is a high Facebook people. So a lot of info they are gonna get from Facebook.”
    b. “I know that in my area, I run a lot of ads. So if other people run ads that are running for different offices in my district, then they’re gonna hear it from the radio also. But I would probably get 9 out of 10 from social media.”
5. How do you think we can get more young people involved in elections?
    a. “That, I’m not sure. Like, I go to the schools and talk to my students. I want them to understand, you know, that voting is important. And not voting also has consequences.”
6. Do you think people in rural Arkansas in general kind of see the state and federal government as ore out of touch compared to their local governments?
    a. “Because it is out of touch. The house of representatives and the senate here in arkansas are the closest to the people. And in reality, the federal government, out federal delegates, are truly the furthest away, and it is because some of it is because of time, and they’re not really here as much as they’d like ot be. I will say Westerman, I think, does a pretty good job of trying to. But like the other ones you only see when they want to be seen. They’re in DC more than they’re here. And we want them to be there because we want them to be representing our state. At the same time, you’ve got to find that balance.”
7. What do you think motivates rural Arkansans to show up on election day?
    a. “I think a lot of mine do early voting. I think if their candidate is pushing for them to please go vote, please go vote, please go vote. I think that does give people more motivation to go vote. I think local elections is what motivates most people to go vote in reality. They want to make sure their local sheriff is who they want it to be, who their local sheriff is, you know what I mean? Yeah, for sure. I think those are cared about a little bit more.”

    b. Agrees that it's the opposite of Little Rock, where federal or state elections probably have more visibility.
    c. “And probably, I mean, in reality, that might be for all municipal, you know, large municipalities. Not, you know, big cities. Fayetteville. You know, those outliers, Jonesboro. But I think more for my area, it’s more about, we want the local sheriff that everybody goes out and votes for that sheriff, or they go out and they vote for that mayor.”
    d. “As a state representative, you always want more people to go vote, though. Yeah, for sure.
8. Within your district, what are the most important issues to your constituents?
    a. “A lot of my constituents will be…schools and very important to my area, Friday Night Lights. You know, that kind of, which will probably not be as big of a deal in Little Rock, I know, but in our areas, in the rural areas, our schools are very, very important.”
    b. “And what keep our, little towns alive. Um economic growth will be something esle that in rural Arkansas, we tend to get left out when it comes to help from the state lebel on economic opportunities. And then I would say uh property rights would be one, or senior citizens and veterans, and then property rights. Those two could be interchangeable.”
9. Have you experienced a lot of rural people feeling left behind? Has it deterred people from wanting to vote?
    a. “Oh. No, I don’t think that affects my area of voting at all. I wouldn’t think that would affect many rural areas at all in their voting. I would be surprised if it did.”
10. What do you think your district is doing right that encourages people to vote?
    a. “I attribute a lot to early voting. A lot of my people do early voting. And I do mean a lot. You win or lose your elections in this district depending on early voting.”
11. What is the community like there?
    a. Very community oriented. Relates to voting, kind of a together thing.
    b. In rural Arkansas, we slow down.

Heber Springs Interview with an Airport Worker

1. Major issues in Heber Springs?
    a. “Taxes, the price of fuel, the cost of living, that type of thing. I think those are the main issues everywhere.”
2. Have you seen any members of this county or city working to increase the voter turnout?
    a. “Yeah, campaigning, you know, campaign signs. You know, as we get closer to voting time. They put up the campaign signs and maybe radio ads, television ads, that kind of thing.
3. Why do you think rural constituents feel discouraged from voting?
    a. “Yeah, we’re in the South. I mean I’m from Indiana, so it’s a lot different in Indiana, but in the south, there’s, I think there’s a lack of, how do I say this without? Don’t quote me on this. No, I think in the South there’s a little less trust when it comes to politics and politics and that, you know, they live their life in a quiet area, stay that way, you know? And I think that has a lot to do with it. And, you know, in Arkansas, population wise, for the size of the state, it’s a lot smaller than some of the smaller states of the larger population for sure.”
4. How has digital media impacted political engagement, has it encouraged or deterred individuals from voting?
    a. “I would say it’s deterred in a lot of ways because there is so much on social media that is false. You know, I mean, it gets kind of heated. People believe everything they see. And AI’s been, it’s been good for some things, but it’s also been a really bad thing. You can’t tell the difference between real and fake…”
5. What do you think about access to transportation in Heber Springs?
    a. “We don’t have a bus system. We do have a taxi service. I work at the airport. We got on an airplane. We can get you out of here, you know, but can’t take you to the polls. We don’t have buses, we don’t have, we do have a taxi service, but year, so.”
6. Do you think that rural voting can be enhanced with local grassroots movements or just politics made on the federal level?
    a. “Grassroots. For sure.”
7. Do you always cast your vote in elections, if so why do you think that’s important?
    a. “Oh, I do every election. Um, I normally vote early, but, uh, you know, I know people say, well, my one vote doesn’t make any difference. If you get 20% of the county saying that, well my vote doesn't count, that’s a lot of votes.”
8. Why do you think young people aren’t inclined to vote?
    a. “Social media is for one thing. I would say that’s probably the number one reason. And they’ve lost trust. And because it’s such a mud-slinging match, you know, and it's either you’re this side of the aisle or that side of the aisle. And they believe everything they hear. And that’s bad. You know, you can’t. You can’t do that. I worked with Fox News for 25 years. I’ve seen both sides. And unfortunately the news media can really mess things up. The kids would really look into the backs and not let someone else make their decisions or make up their mind for them. Then it’d be a little different.”
9. Do you feel like rural people are more prone to distrusting the government, especially on the federal level, if so why?

a. “I guess it goes back to, in the southern states, you know there’s still some…I put this. You know there’s a lot of old thinking, you know, with the south and the north, and you know “I’m a Yankee. I’m a hillbilly,’ you know that kind of…and I think it’s just lack of being educated. And I’m not saying that in a way that they’re not educated. I don’t think they educate themselves enough with current events is what I’m saying. You know, they’re stuck in a…it’s like Democrat or Republican, you know, some people are stuck in a Democrat world from 1960 or 1970s. Well, the party’s changed. The Republican Parties changed. Over the years. And I don’t think they’ve kept up with that. And I’m talking about both sides of the aisle here.”

Interview with young worker at the Heber Springs Community Center

1. Do you know of any voting initiatives that have been implemented in Heber Springs?
    a. “Not really aware of any, honestly.”
2. Have you seen anyone work to increase voter turnout here?
    a. “So, we have the mayor elections coming up soon. And like the LT Davis guy he’s been putting a lot of advertisements out everywhere.”
3. Why do you think people are discouraged from voting?
    a. “I mean, honestly, like completely honest, I feel like a lot of people here are so sexist and that’s like, we have a female running, and it’s just like, I feel like no one even tries to care because, like you already know who’s going to get picked, you know…and it’s just like you just kind of assume how we’re gonna vote around here.”
4. Do you think digital media has encouraged or deterred individuals from voting?
    a. “I feel like it honestly helps a lot. But just not here. Because once again, Heber, like most of it’s just like old white rich people, and they’re going to vote for the guy every time. So even with Casey, like advertising, doing her campaigns and stuff, like she does a lot of stuff on social media, but like no one really cares about it.”
5. What do you think about transportation here?
    a. “If you don’t have your own car, yeah, you’re pretty much screwed. We have, like one person, like an individual person that goes around just like taxi driving, but besides that, there's not really anything.”
6. Do you think from what you’ve seen, do you think a lot of young people vote?
    a. “Yeah I feel like a lot of young people here, like they say they’re going to vote, but like no one really does. It’s like they talk about it all the time. I feel like a lot of people are just lazy around here. Like they just don’t care. Like genuinely, they just don’t care at all.
    b. “I do vote, but a lot of people around here, like, I don’t know, not only are they just kind of uneducated, but why also just, like, don’t care.
    c. “I feel like honestly, the school never really talked about, like how important voting is or anything. Like no one really ever mentioned it or talked about it.”

Interview with Heber Springs County Clerk Elect

1. Tell me about yourself and Heber Springs
    a. 12th year in County Clerk office, lived in Heber Springs their whole life
2. Biggest challenge facing the community?
    a. “Keeping up with Tourism. Keeping businesses in the community alive because it is a tourist town.”
3. Do people in bigger cities understand what life is like here?”
    a. “I would say no. It’s very different.”
4. How easy is it for people to access healthcare when they need it?
    a. “Not much of a problem receiving healthcare.”
5. Do people have to drive a long way?
    a. “That’s a possibility,”
6. Jobs and opportunities for young people?
    a. “Probably not.”
7. Why do you guys think it's so important to vote in elections?
    a. “We’d love to have informed voters who care about the process and research the candidates and vote according to their beliefs and better their community.”
8. What makes it easier or harder for people around here to vote?
    a. “I’m not sure why it would be hard. We have two week so early voting…that’s a long time for people to catch us to vote. Then there’s absentee voting if they’re unable or on vacation. So unless they’re physically unable, it’s pretty available for everyone.”
9. Why are voter turnout rates so low then?
    a. “I don’t know if people educate themselves enough. I hate to say they don’t make the effort.”
    b. “I don’t know why that would be. Counts just like everyone else’s.”
10. Where do most Heber Springs residents get their information about elections and candidates?
    a. “Social media.”
11. Do you think local elected officials interact with the people here?
    a. “Yes.”
    b. 13 spread out polling location
12. Hope about the future?
    a. “I hope the upcoming generations will care enough to educate themselves and get involved."
13. How accessible is it to access transportation?
    a. “I’ve not really heard that to be an issue.”
14. Do you think small businesses are held to a high standard compared to big corporations?
    a. “I don’t think so.”
15. How is community engagement here?
    a. “We have a very active chamber of commerce. A lot of businesses don’t prepare enough for tourism. It’s a great place with a lot of opportunities.
16. What made you guys want to be more involved in politics?
    a. “My dad was the justice of peace and administrative assistance to the county judge. I’ve just been involved all my life.”
17. Does social media encourage or deter people from voting?

a. “I would think it would be encouraging if people read it. If it shows up in their algorithm and if they’re interested enough to read it”.

Interview with the Mayor of Heber Springs

1. Major issues that concern Cleburne County?
    a. “We have a flooding problem downtown that we are trying to get mitigated with a FEMA grant, not easy waiting on the federal government.”
2. Voting initiatives that have been implemented.
    a. 2 bond initiatives.
    b. Refinanced them in 2021- bought a splash pad
    c. Drainage projects
    d. Bathrooms at Sandy Beach
3. How successful has that been in increasing voter turnout?
    a. “I think it’s hard. Not many voters come to a special election. The first time I ran for mayor, it was a special election. Not a big turnout.”
4. How have you attempted to encourage voter turnout?
    a. “I try to push it at voting time. I do a weekly video update, so when it’s voter time I try to push out that your vote counts and if you’re not registered, you’ve got to be registered by this date.”
    b. “In a local election it definitely matters. Our population is 7,000 and we have just under 2,000 registered voters. That’s a big deal.”
    c. “If you're not engaged in that world, you don’t really know the steps. The chain of command or how it works.”
5. Do you believe individuals or current incumbents are effective in responding to the issues in cleburne county?
    a. “I would say yes.”
6. Why do rural constituents feel discouraged from voting?
    a. “I think a lot of people don’t see the bigger picture. It’s hard for them to look at it from that perspective. A lot of mayors recently are criticized or bullied , but people don’t look at all the moving parts. We have to make sure what we’re doing is good for the whole community, not just one block or one business.”
7. How has digital media impacted voting in your community? Encouraged or deterred?
    a. “I think it could go either way depending on the campaign you run. What response you're looking for, you're going to find it.”
8. How important is it for local politicians to interact with the community?
    a. “Very important. You need to build relationships. People need to know you're approachable and if they have a problem they can come to the mayor's office or call or send an email.”
9. How do you deal with the trust issue?
    a. “I think educating them. I spend a lot of time educating them on what my job is. I don't make decisions myself. I have a city council.”
10. Does Heber Springs have financial trouble during election season?
    a. “I don't think the city does. All the election stuff is under the county. The state pays for voting machines and to my knowledge they’re good.”
11. How difficult is it to access transportation?
    a. “We don't have public transportation, for the senior community there's a bus they can take for free?”

12. With a strong community do you see people getting more correct information than false information online?
    a. “If people would pick one palace to get information that they knew was true. That would be helpful.”
13. Do you think it's more that people are uninformed of what they’re voting for or do you think that they feel hopeless?
    a. “I think they are uninformed. I think they don’t do their homework. If they would dig into it a little bit more, they could make better decisions. But it’s finding that information a lot of people don't know where to look, what website to go to.”
14. Can you tell me a little bit about the more rural part of Cleburne County?
    a. “Heber Springs is the county seat. It has the only Walmart. There’s a lot of dollar generals, but I think that everyone around us in the county has to come to Heber for amenities.”
15. Do people from cities understand what life is like here?
    a. “It depends what perspective they come from. We are a tourist community. A lot of people have been here since childhood or they vacation here.”
16. Do you think there's enough jobs and opportunities for young people here?
    a. “There could be more.”
17. What got you involved in politics?
    a. “It’s kind of funny how that happened. My husband ran for city council years ago. And my friends said hey why don't you run. My husband does work for the city. He's a detective. It went from being in the rotary club to wanting to give back to my community. When the previous mayor stepped down it was time to go big or go home, so I went for it.”
18. What makes it easier or harder for people here to vote?
    a. “Being engaged in the community, knowing what's going on and knowing they can make changes by voting?”
19. Story about civic engagement
    a. “I had a business partner for 17 years in the salon and she would always complain about it and I said do you vote and she said no and I was like then you can’t complain about it. She was like what do you mean and I was like if you don’t vote then you can’t complain about it if you're not going to vote you don't have a vote if you want to make a change you need to register to vote so you can vote.”
    b. “She lived in the county and she didn’t think it mattered.”
20. Where do most people get information about elections and candidates?
    a. “Social media.”
21. Have you noticed other barriers to voting?
    a. “I think people are just forgetting about it. You have to keep reminding them. Hey, it's election day, early voting. That one-on -one contact is priceless.”
22. What gives you hope about the future of Heber Springs?
    a. Downtown beautification, drainage project, sidewalks downtown. More parking.
23. Have you noticed political polarization here?
    a. “Yes.”
24. How do you think we can change voter culture and encourage those to refuse to vote?

a. “I think getting them engaged, whether that's social media, or I think it's gonna have to be social media. Some fun tik tok reel or whatever platform to engage them to know that it matters. It’s basic like it’s your 9th grade civics. It’s the same thing. It’s just getting plugged in or having that group of friends. I think it’s just wanting to be involved in the community. To have that civic mindset.”
b. “I don’t think they understand, well Trump’s the president and he did this and that’s crazy. But they don’t understand how that trickles down to the local level. Like they passed the brick bill like is my fema grant going away, come to find out it was fine because it was congressionally distributed funds, but by them cutting that federal funding it trickles down to smaller communities that get what they need. Rural Arkansas I think doesn't get the funding they need because they give us this platform that gives us their much larger scale. If you go to Bentonville, where everything’s big because it’s Bentonville, they have that tax income. Don’t forget about the little people. Not everything needs to be geared toward a large community. There's only a handful of large communities in Arkansas and it's mostly rural. So I feel like a lot of times we get left out.”
c. “It’s all connected. I mean we pay a tax to go get gas and that money goes into a fund for the state street agent that they then divide out to the city that they pave roads. People don't see that they just want their trash picked up and their water to run and they don’t care about how that happens.”

25. Do you think people in heber are good at advocating for one another?
    a. “If someone needs something, like someone’s house burns down, then the community is quick to come together. But I’ve seen them very divided over an ambulance contract. It was awful it almost divided the community. We ended up getting the contract for the company we wanted.”

Interview with former representative LeAnn Burch who represents District 9

Transcription Note: The following interview was transcribed from an audio recording. While efforts were made to preserve the accuracy and original meaning of the conversation, minor transcription errors, grammatical inconsistencies, or discrepancies may be present.

- Okay, starting off with your path into public service, but you came into the legislature after Representative Lampkin's death. Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like stepping into that seat under those circumstances?
    - "Uh, drinking from the fire hose? She died, uh, just to put a little bit into perspective for me. Um, a couple of things were happening in my life that made it possible for me to even consider doing that. Um, I had been in the military. Um, and I, that was, in 2016, it was 2016, uh, that March, I had formally retired from the military. So, I'd been in the reserves the last many years. And, in the military, there, there's non-partisan, anything, and politics was the least, um, the least consideration on my mind at all. But the other thing was my husband had died. Um, in January of 2015. So, I was kind of in a different state, so to speak, of my life with the military. I was still an attorney with DHS Department of Human Services in child and adult welfare. But that was my day job. But I had these other things going on. So, we could, I know Miss Sheila. I knew her well, she was wonderful and didn't have children, so the entirety of the community that she represented was her, you know, her passion, her kids, everybody, um, were more of an extension of her public service and who she wanted to help. So, I came to know her and went to church. It was July. It was July 24th because that was my husband, that was my anniversary. It was a hard day and our pastor announced that she had passed. And I, she had announced, I want to say like on Tuesday of that week, that. She was sick and, there might have been another kind of announcement that maybe that she wasn't going to, to run again or she was, there was something or anyway. But to her sudden death, just put everybody kind of into a tailspin. So, buzz forward to a phone call I had from somebody local who said, hey, you're, I've talked to you before, and you said you weren't interested in running for office, would you consider doing it now? And I kind of was at that when somebody had asked me about it before, not now, but heck no, had too many other things going on and certainly. Well, my husband was alive, that was not a construction at all. But when he came back and he said, hey, can we at least talk about it? I was in a position to say, whoa, I know what Miss Sheila used to do. I know how important she was to the community. I don't know who could step into those shoes. And then the realization that kind of, you know, if not Nathan who, if you're called to serve in some way. And this is an opportunity, why should I not at least consider it? I was just bold enough to think that I could, kind of throw all the energy that I'd have for the military, that I've been doing for all those years, um, in my free time, into something like this. So, with that little bit of, huh, let me consider it, um, mind. I didn't know who was Democrat and who was Republican. I didn't know who was red or blue. I didn't know who in our community were leaders in either of those areas, had not been something I looked at, was not even interested in doing. However, I have a brother who is and has been involved peripherally in politics. Um, for many, many years, and then I have another brother who had gotten into it and was also, a little bit more directly involved in it. And I called him and said,

hey, what about this? Um, that's not the other call I made. I, this is one of those, I will disclose this to you only because it just shows you how naive. I was, but also the interesting way politics turned in Arkansas. Um, I had worked closely with Tim Griffin. He was one of my soldiers. So he was uh, a lieutenant commander in, I had the legal command. That was, I was the commander of the US Army Reserve Legal Command, and he was a deputy commander in one of my subordinate groups. So I had now been named for a couple of years through the, well, for several years through the reserves, but had specifically not been named then. Anyway, um, went on to, uh, there was a convention and because, Drew County voted more heavily for the previous Democratic governor than Ashley County did. We got one more vote, and because of that, Nashville County proponent, I, won out over her and I went on the ballot. Yeah. So there were 2 ballots that November. But again, we're talking about finding out she died in July. Start looking into this the 1st week in August. So, I say all that to say, I didn't have time to worry about it. I didn't have time to think about it. I didn't have to, Tom could do a whole lot other than to say, I'm interested in running. And the cheap shot and the way I truly know that I won and I don't know that I would have won even back then is because his name got taken and his votes did not count. Whatever it was, the court determined that he could not count his votes. So in that November ballot, there was a special election to fill Sheila's seat from November or whenever the votes were certified by the Secretary of State, until December 31st, and then for the next 2 year term. So those were votes that his name his, his name didn't count on, so kind of walked into that, although at the time, had no earthly idea about it, and I was going around telling, you know, people, all that, I just wanted to represent people, I'm trying to figure out, I don't know, if I had blue suits in my closet at the time. So, all of that to say, I had no idea what I was doing. I got led by the nose into that 1st thing, and it was luck. I had no idea how things worked, how things did anything, I didn't understand anything. So I got that there. And basically kept my mouth shut, didn't file anything, tried to visit everybody and all the towns around, um, I went to parades. I went to stuff where I thought I'd meet people. I put all this effort into writing articles for the newspaper. I would take what, I don't know if you know, they, you don't have to write anything. They'll put you, paper, and put it in your local paper. It looks like you wrote it with your picture. Well, I would take the original and I would, I'd spend hours and hours. This is where I went and the things I did. All of these things, I thought, made a difference in reaching out and touching. The population. You've seen me, you know who I am. When I came up for reelection, nobody ran against me, because I think at least, People kind of knew me and it was great…"

- "It [what her opposing candidate said about her in a later election] was what you raised taxes, you did. You know, you killed babies. One photo came out and it had a picture of me with Nancy Pelosi and AOC. For me, AOC was the administrative office of the corps. I didn't certainly have anything to do with her, but that photo came out. Um, there was a photo that came out with a picture that had come off my social media with. That guy [her opponent] used against me, you know, the godfather pulling strings. I think that was the media. They started doing it. It wasn't just the half paid ads. I mean the flyers, the glossy ones. They were doing 8 by 11 glossies against me. It was what people saw. It was what they heard. It was how they formed an impression when they didn't have an impression.

And it was also a part of the big world where. Now, we don't trust any Democrats anymore. We associate them with the fringes. We associate them with, um, Socialism in these, in, you know, social democracy wasn't even a term back then. So all of those things. I truly believe that the powerful onslaught of mailers, which had so much money behind it, was what hit voters down here. It has nothing to do with getting the people to actually get out and vote, but it was about the mindset that when you got into the voting booth, what did you know? What did you remember? What had been? Touched, what it touched. I remember Howard's on the, then, the 1st robocall thing that went out. It was a text and it was Liam versus razor taxes if you'd like to, basically, if you'd like to talk to Howard about it, uh, punch this button. And it sounded like him talking. I mean, obviously it was his voice, but, and it was, um, where can I meet you? Why, you know, it was personal, it was targeted, and people liked it. Well, except all the ones that were sending me snapshots saying, who the hell is this person sending us notes and we don't like it and we're telling them to stop. So, I think that started, so that was 2016. I think that started an influence on what, that started changing. Part of what influenced world voters now because, um, and certainly in 2016 also, they started getting more targeted social media. Instagram, not so much Facebook because, you know, that's the older people, but a lot more younger targeted Instagram stuff. So, that is my, what, 15 minute, 20 minute lecture on how I got where I got, and how I started appreciating and understanding, how, how people, how we get to people here."

- Last weekend and I was asking my questions about voting and what not, and a lot of the younger people kind of have this viewpoint that it doesn't matter and nothing would make a difference, whereas I feel like the older people maybe did think that it was super important, and they kind of talked about it more like a duty. Is this something you've noticed in your county maybe with the younger people talking about? Maybe having more apathy towards voting?
    - "Yeah, and I think part of that is a relation to the age in general and how we get our news, the older people are more likely to sit down and spend time, analyzing, thinking, reading the newspaper. One of the things that was evident in my classes. Nobody raised the newspaper, certainly not the Democrat Gazette. At least at one time, you know, the paper ones you could carry with you and the older people, you saw that. They were carrying the newspaper with them. Now it's on a tablet, and frankly, the people that carry their phones. I mean, you're not reading a newspaper on your phone, you're reading, whatever those, whatever app has decided which headline is going to get to you as a part of your news. So that choice and that influence and the power of immediacy and not spending time, but feeling like you know everything. It's more what I see with the younger population, where the older people are a little bit more reticent about believing what pops up on their phone, or comes up as a single headline, because they have experience and, um, education to know that there's probably more to it. I think younger, the younger students that I associated with were more willing to believe that if they looked at 3 different sites with news that they were educated on what was going on in the world and that they understood it and that, that's all they had time for. And the older influences on the older, again, especially considering your, uh, life experiences made you want to ask more questions. Younger populations are much more willing to accept what some people

believed was important. And if it was somebody that they may trust or somebody else like that app, then they were likely to accept it as gospel. And I think that's still the case. It's the case on most everything, but the educated people. Um. It's just that they're older. And that's not who's coming up and how to influence that is where I hope you and your project and your experiences and reach will have an influence."

- I hope so too. Kind of on representing a rural district, your district covers parts of Drew and Ashley Counties, which are more rural, what did you see as the biggest structural challenges facing rural constituents there?

    - "So in, in general, One of the, Things that came up for Dermot and, I don't even think Dermot was, but it's close enough, it was indicative of kind of what's going on. They lost their only grocery store. Um, and and part of the stuff I was doing, you get to remember I was campaigning in in 2016 with Eddie Cheatham a lot. He was a Democratic state senator down here. He and I were very closely aligned. And, um, so, his district, which is sort of kind of now Senate district one, um, had, had some more rural places, Eudora and, uh, like I said, Dumas and McGee and like village. So some of those places I was by virtue of being close to him, seeing and knowing, they, they didn't have fresh fruit. They didn't have any, they were relying on SNAP benefits for, um, a lot of junk stuff. I remember Mary Bentley tried to run a bill, and it did not pass, and now it's federal law, so it's much easier. Uh, the one that recently went into effect that removed sodas, sugary sodas, um, I mean, the unhealthy things from your SNAP benefits. Well, down here in Ashley County. Um, I had the, they had one large grocery store, and when she ran that bill, I reached out to try to find, you know, a sense of what people around here thought would happen if that happened, if that bill were to pass, and they could use, um, you know, the cards for Sodas, for instance. And I remember, the, the grocery store owner and, um, cross it, said, I may lose up the 13 employees. I said, what are you talking about? And he said, if they can't buy their, and later cokes, and candy bars with their guards. Here, they're going across the state line where they can. And I'm not gonna be able to keep the people, um, employed here, if that passes. And it was such a, I was like, here I'm thinking, all right, you know, we're all wanting to have kids be more healthy, and, um, you know, what would you do to kind of switch your thing? He was looking at economics of, of, who was going to be? Who's gonna lose their jobs? Now, do I know if that actually happened now or if it's happening? I don't know, but it was a whole different perspective. So what I saw from the rural people was, They're, some of the more outlying areas, their priorities are things like eating. Getting the kids to school. It's not trying to find where their voting place is to vote for somebody that they just don't know or trust. And can't see how it's going to help make it easier for them to get more. Um, grocery stores. Or food trucks or whatever. So it was basic. The rural sense of things was it was a basic understanding that I had to be educated about. Another thing, another one whenever I was political, and I was going around, and I went into the, um, uh, city hall for lack of a better term, but I don't think that's exactly what it was in Hamburg. And there was a woman behind the glass where you could pay your fines and they had that little municipal court in there and the mayor's office was in the building. It was a multi-use building, but

anyway, civic building for the most part, or municipal building for the most part. And I said, hey, I'm LeAnn Burch, and I am running for your state representative position, and I'd love your vote. And the girl looked up at me, she said, Oh, I don't vote. And this is somebody who's working in a government office, right? So why would you not, vote, tell me, help me understand and she said, oh, I just don't think it's that important. I don't think it makes a big difference. And this was like, at least a little educated person. And we walked away and I was actually having a nightmare. He was walking me around at the time and he said, she's married to a state trooper. Does she not understand the importance? I don't know, representatives that vote on their budget, let alone anything. She had no. No sense if that was important. The, the people who are just trying to get my eye, are the people that I worked with a lot of DHS, his kids ended up in foster care because of the neglect, but a lot of time, the neglect was born out of a, I'm trying to do other things that I've got other priorities besides my kids. It wasn't that I didn't level. I just couldn't manage everything all at the same time and by the way, I'm getting a ride to work from somebody else if the kid misses school or misses the bus. I'm already at work. Kid misses the bus. I didn't even know about it till school called me after 14 days of missing me. And now we end up in Finn's court. So. It was, it's that kind of thing that I don't think people, uh, in Northwest Arkansas, certainly, have an appreciation for, the rural concept itself means that you are less able to get to a grocery store, get your kids, you're not taking your kids to school every day. Um, you are certainly not educating them on things, one of the, one of the pet peeves that still have and in this whole world is that we can get a bill passed to do some kind of sex education in schools to require at least some kind of basic thing. We leave it up to the schools. Which is ironic right now because I just got on the school board in Monticello, so we're, we're going to see how that goes. But anyway, the, um, the sense that the people in Lorock had, and certainly, I don't know if you know Jury Cox and his group, but family council is very influential to say, well, kids learn about that stuff in their home. They learn about it at church. like, What world are you in, man? Yeah, we had the highest teenage pregnancy rate we did at the time from like 16 to 19 or something, 15 to 19 something like that. And we're supposed to be, we're teaching this stuff. We don't, we're not teaching the kids things because the parents aren't in the home. So when those are your priorities and worries about food or your next state of marijuana, medical marijuana or whatever down here, that you're not thinking back into the boat. You certainly don't think that you can influence. So until we figure out how to tell people that your vote means you can influence how this is directly going to impact your life. We're still going to continue to have an uphill battle. There was such a relationship with, um, individuals and trust when we were politicking in the courthouse lawns, when the people who were politicking were riding around in cars and shaking hands and, you know, holding babies and going to the church picnics and stuff. That's not how we do politics anymore. We politic by, you know, robo calls and ugly flyers. And we don't influence people enough on how to understand the importance of your vote. We don't, and it's not just, well, isn't the importance, but marketing it. I think that's where we're filing. I think we fail in marketing. Um, It's for one party, the truth really doesn't matter, so you say anything. And I think our truth is, we're a little bit more, the Democrat Party is a little bit more interested in, and maybe not allowing that to happen, or at least

that's the month. So, how do you get people to believe that their thinking matters, but that they don't need to spend a lot of time thinking because we market it to them better. Because they don't have time. They don't have time to read it. They don't have time to consider, no time to think about what Ben Gilmore's dad does and his 3 brothers do, and who's actually writing that script that sounds so awful and pulling AOC's picture besides somebody else. (In reference to ads against her ran by her opponent in an election cycle): I did vote to raise internet taxes. I voted to raise your phone tags, because the 911 system, which was ancient in rural Arkansas, and you can find people anymore, and you've been funded by hardline, uh, telephone taxes, and people didn't have hard lines anymore. That's what ran as a bill, and all the county judges came and said, we got to have this. And our judges came and said, please tax the internet stuff because we are losing out on money and our mom and pop stores are losing. They can't sell a TV because you're selling TV without tax online. And please vote for these bills and my, My constituency said, we need this, and then my constituency said, what, you raise taxes? We're not voting for you. So, selling things in a way that young people and rural voters can capture and stick in their head and make them think that it matters is a bridge that we haven't crossed."

- On the subject of physical barriers, a lot of people have talked about a lot of the transportation of the polls or maybe a lack of access to broadband, which limits the ability to get information on candidates. Are those things that you see being big barriers to voting in your community?
    - "Well, there are of course barriers, but the reality is. We don't use them even when we have them. So, um, do I think that that was a big thing? Absolutely, I did. Figure out how to get groceries, and figure out how to do things, uh, like research, are the people that we need to have voting, the people who don't have internet, don't have the ability to research, and are just going to vote the way somebody who gives them $10, that was a thing here for a long time. It's, it's almost a way of, of, of life. Why? Why does it matter? How are you going to change the fact that I don't have a vehicle to get to work or that I can only work at Taco Bell? I can't get a job anywhere else and I'm probably not going to be able to hold that because I can't get out of bed because I've overdosed on medical marijuana. Which, I mean, I'd really like to see a study that looked at the counties in Arkansas and looked at how many people could not devote and want the status of our marijuana sales. Because I think it's probably a little bit of a relation because we self-meditate. Um, whether it's through an extreme news source, or medicinal, or whatever, more. So more. back So to back to the access. There that aren't many that people many that people are that living, are living so far so away far that away they that can't, they figure can't, figure out out how to how vote, to that vote, make, that The make, big the difference big in difference the in numbers the numbers right now. right Yes, now. the Yes, answer the is, answer yes. Black churches are educating their people about candidates. Churches are the lifeline of rural communities. And I think those individuals who individuals, are who, being, are that being, I that would I hope would they hope they were educated enough to to know how to know how to to, even to register even about. registered about, Are, They are, They can figure out ways out ways to to to get get to to vote through vote through groups that they that are they are associated with. So reaching is the problem. I will tell

you about my mother who is 88 right now. She can't get to the courthouse to vote physically. It's always at the courthouse [in Drew County]. the courthouse. It's in It's the in basement, the so basement, you so you have have to to go go down a down a flight flight of, of, you you have have to to go go up a up flight a flight of of stairs and stairs and down down a a flight of flight stairs. of stairs. It's just the handicap situation that makes it difficult physically to vote in early voting. So for her, I go and go and get her her ballot, but she has had to, to, the hoops the we hoops had we to had go to go through to through, to do her do ballot. To me, actually, it actually took 3 trips to the courthouse. Um, with between her, her, she had to to call, call, she she had had to to request it. I had to had go to go pick pick up stuff, up had stuff, I to had sign to stuff, sign had stuff, I to had bring to back bring back the the agreement that agreement I that I was was going going to be to the be person the to person sign to sign it. Then it. I Then I had to had get to her get ballot, her ballot, when ballots when ballots became became available, available and and take take it it to to her, her, and then I then had I to had bring to bring that back. that back. All of those things, those things, that's more difficult than. difficult than Anything, you anything, know, you know, fact the fact we can't. we Just can't. mail Just mail it in a whole lot here. Yeah, and could she have mailed it in? Yes, in, they're yes, if just, they're I just, mean, I mean, was it crazy. was, like, it was crazy. It It was was so so hard. hard. And And I I have, um, have, I um, have I might a have couple a couple of of degrees degrees and I and found I it found difficult, it difficult, isn't isn't it? So, when we make those things more things happen. difficult, More difficult, people who already have barriers have barriers in their lives. their lives. I, I, you you know, know, why why is is that really that a really thing? a thing? My mother looks My mother to looks me to me and and says, says, who do who do I need I to need vote to for? And I And look I look at her and and say, this say, is this your vote, your but vote, the but the reality is, reality is, I'm I'm saying, saying, well, compare well, these compare 2 these people. 2 These people. is where This is you where find you out find out this about person. this person. But by the time we get there, I don't know, I know. I don't know, county sheriff. sheriff. She couldn't care couldn't less. She just really wants just wants to to vote vote for for Hallie Shoffner right now. You know, You she, know, she she, doesn't she doesn't care care about our about sheriff's our right, sheriff's so race, just which already is ugly, already because ugly, our because incoming our oil, incoming oil, our, our, our our current current sheriff, is sheriff, uh, is lined uh, up. lined up. I think I'll be the primaries. I was crazy. So, I not, that's not true. the county judge, so sure it's not. But, um, Back to your question. Did I think that, uh, access? Yeah, I think access is a problem. But the driving people. To the balance, we gotta get the people who are actually wanting to vote, to get to the ballot, the people who can, not. We need to recognize that that's an issue because we, we represent rural communities. We represent every person. But the people who are not able to get anywhere are probably the people who are not studying it, they're just going to vote for whatever mailer shows up in their mailbox. Unless they're riding on the bus, which has now been outlined, are outlawed, you know, from their church, with a sample ballot on how they're supposed to vote, because somebody else is telling them. And by the way, we're gonna have a big potluck afterward, or we're gonna buy you dinner after. Yeah, it's. So I don't, I don't think it's as simple as we need to send a bus around and have more

voting centers. Do I think that that's? Preferable, absolutely. But I also know what those machines are like and and we don't have, uh, the broadband capabilities and a lot of places we used to have all those little, you know, we had 20 voting sites and Drew County for a while. Well, now. I don't know, we got two. You got 30 miles to do it? Uh, people on Tiller. They have to come to Monticella. That's 20 miles. 25 Anyway. So, access is a problem. I don't think it's our only problem. Yes, and but it's one that we want to make sure that we talk about because it shows that we recognize the unique challenges of rural Arkansas. It's not the, um, It's not the sword we need to die on."

- Do you think that people in rural Arkansas are more distrusting of maybe state and federal, the federal government compared to like a local government?
    - "Yes, because the only thing they watch is the extreme stuff on TV that tells them how they should think. And I'm saying that. Not for, I, Not for all the population, but for the people who are less likely to be in a group that talks about issues, that exposes them to other things, because when you're, in the real world. You're, Your world is, YouSocial media. You get a lot more things like radio and free TV. You can put out your little antenna, and get free TV, where you are closer to an actual station, as opposed to out here. Rabbit ears. Arkansas, pick up Louisiana channels."

- I read that you served on aging, children and youth, education, transportation and joint budget. Which of those ended up mattering the most through districts and why?
    - "First, nobody down here knows what any committees are. No, you don't understand it? We don't have a call about it. And despite my attempts. to weekly educate them on what each committee had done and said and passed. Um, in the newspaper? I didn't get a sense that people know about those at all. Where I was able to make more of an impact. Was on the people that probably didn't appreciate it. We had one of those, um, uh, new legislation. Oh, I don't know, we had, you know, a couple of days to come and you learn to be in all when you're driving up to the Capitol building, and you learn to be a person of all the people have gone before you, and you learn, you know, you've got to use your voice, and, and all these things, which is all great, because whenever, don't mention fire hose. I didn't know anything. Thanks to my brothers, at least I know something about the committee. Um, I, I understood. That we had as much responsibility to stop bad bills as we did to pass good bills. And the children using families that you talked about, it was also, it was called, uh, what, children use, families, military, and something. Now I can't say, 18 children. Use military legislative affairs, I think, something like that. So the committee also had military stuff. Well, and I knew a little bit about the military, so whenever a military bill came through like from the, uh, military department of Arkansas, the guard folks, I, I, I can make a difference because I could talk about the impression and what it would really do in Arkansas. I could talk to children, eat, family stuff, and say why this bill is a really bad bill for the Department of Human Services, ability to do this, this, or this, in the education world. I felt like I come from a long line of educators that I could talk about education. All of those. Of all of those, I had the most influence in Asian children youth because nobody knew enough or cared enough to learn what DHS was about, which is where a lot of that stuff was, let alone military. So I could have a voice there. Um, in the voting. So despite what I tried to do, there was always somebody that

was going to make sure that even if it was a good thing that we were trying to pass, it was going to be their idea and they would pass it as their bill. Not as our bill. So, um, join budget, not any influence hardly at all because budget in Arkansas is an art, and you, the biggest thing you can do is learn who to trust in, in the permanent positions, not the people that are elected, but the people in the permanent positions have been there for 30 years, and that understand how the budgeting works. The best thing you can do is help learn from them and then try to do little digs and raising because of a joint budget. It's such a big committee. It's hard to make any individual. difference. I mean, we could always, one of the things that could."

Rural Voter Turnout in Arkansas

By: Sanjana Koneru

Three teenagers at a park in Perryville, Arkansas describe their town in almost apologetic terms: “everybody knows everybody’s business,” and the result, in their own words, is “kind of toxic in a way.” When asked whether they’d register to vote, one answered without hesitation: “I just don’t think that would really make a difference to me, and I don’t have the time” and it was just “never really a big deal here.” The explanation offered most often for low rural voter turnout is distance, precincts too far to reach, roads in poor condition, and broadband access too limited to research a ballot. That explanation is accurate, however, it is also (on its own) insufficient to account for what is happening in rural Arkansas. Instead, the more determinative barriers are not geographic but psychological and material, a documented deficit in political efficacy, a broader erosion of political trust, and—for the state’s poorest rural families—a hierarchy of needs in which voting simply does not rank.

The Distance

Perry County is poor, rural, and shrinking, with no public transit, or even traffic lights. The Perry County Judge, Larry Blackmon described the geography plainly: because the county is so rural, “some people have to drive 6 or 8 miles just to go to the voting precinct,” and because polling places are spread out to cover so much ground, “it’s not like an easy trip. You have to plan it.” Rural residents make up nearly 45% of Arkansas’s population (Seo and Goodman), and nationally, an estimated 60 percent of rural young adults live in what researchers term civic deserts, areas with too few institutions or gathering spaces to normalize civic participation (“Civic Deserts”). Limited broadband access compounds the problem as much of rural Arkansas remains underserved because serving sparsely populated areas is not cost-effective for providers, which makes it harder for residents to locate polling information or research candidates independently.

The clearest illustration of this barrier comes from former Arkansas state representative LeAnn Burch in southeast Arkansas, describing her 88-year-old mother, who can no longer manage the stairs to the courthouse basement where Drew County holds early voting. Securing an absentee ballot for her required three separate trips to the courthouse—one to request it, one to sign paperwork authorizing delivery, and one to collect and return the completed ballot. “All those things, that’s more difficult than anything,” Burch says. “And I have a couple of degrees and found it difficult.”

But Burch's experience in southeast Arkansas is not universal across the state's rural communities. In Perry County, about 40 miles away from Little Rock, even the barrier of distance is not evenly felt. Blackmon's account describes life on the outskirts, where residents are spread across the county's more remote stretches, not necessarily Perryville, the largest town in the County. A group of teens in Perryville, when asked about barriers or difficulties associated with voting, said there weren't any, but rather it just was not a "big deal" in the area and it did not matter. If distance and access were the primary explanation, the remedy would be straightforward: additional precincts, improved roads, and expanded broadband access, and for outskirts residents like the one Blackmon describes, that remedy might help. But it would fail to explain countless other rural towns where access was never the main issue.

Heber Springs, the county seat of Cleburne County, presents a counterexample. Local election officials and residents describe access as a non-issue; the county clerk-elect described voting access as "pretty available for everyone." Despite this, the Mayor estimated that, out of a population of 7,000, only about 2,000 residents are registered to vote. When asked to explain the gap, residents did not point to logistics. A young community center employee, discussing a female candidate for mayor, states plainly: "I feel like no one even tries to care, because you already know who's going to get picked"—describing an electorate he views as older and wealthier. Even residents who explicitly reject the "my vote doesn't count" mentality describe a parallel erosion in trusted information sources. This is often attributed to the current media environment which contains a plethora of misinformation and disinformation as well as numerous online echo chambers.

The Efficacy Gap

Internal efficacy refers to an individual's belief that they understand how the political process works, whereas external efficacy is the belief that political institutions would be receptive to citizens. In Arkansas, internal efficacy is ultimately very low. External efficacy is described as low to moderate across the state in both rural and urban parts. Only about 35 percent of Arkansas voters reported trusting the federal government even half the time, compared with a national average of 46 percent, and the state ranks 49th out of 50 in trust between residents ("2023 ARKANSAS CIVIC HEALTH INDEX"). This gap in federal trust is specifically tied to rural identity; rural residence and rural place-based identity correlate with lower trust in the federal government across both Republican and Democratic administrations, even

though rural Arkansas strongly favors one party over another ("Party Control of Arkansas State Government"). The consequences of that distrust extend beyond the ballot box. Rural areas across the country accepted COVID-19 vaccines at markedly lower rates than their urban counterparts (Kirk). Part of that low internal efficacy appears rooted in inadequate civic preparation. A worker at the Heber Springs Community Center described his own civic education as something that simply did not happen. Younger residents display the sharper edge of this gap. "It's the same people with the same jobs and nothing's going to change," one Perry County small-business owner says, explaining why he believes his neighbors do not vote, despite voting himself. Representative Burch describes encountering this firsthand while canvassing a rural courthouse, where a woman working behind the glass at the municipal fines window told her, without hesitation, that she did not vote because she saw no evidence it mattered—despite working inside a government building daily.

Distrust of the federal government does not necessarily extend to the local government. Former Arkansas State Representative DeAnn Vaught describes Washington as "truly the farthest away" from her constituents' daily lives, while local races drew participation because of more immediate and visible outcomes. Rural voters tend to prioritize tangible local concerns over national platforms, even as rural communities show comparatively low rates of civic-organization membership (Booth and Hussain).

Bandwidth Poverty

Efficacy and distrust, however, account for only part of the pattern Burch describes after two terms representing a rural district. The remainder, in her assessment, is more basic and considerably harder to address: many families simply lack the time and mental bandwidth to engage with politics because their daily lives are consumed by immediate survival. Nearly 30% of adult Arkansans experience food insecurity (Price). In many rural communities that insecurity exists alongside limited childcare options, unstable employment, and long travel distances to essential services. These challenges coexist with one another to result in a cycle of logistical problems that leave little room for civic engagement. Burch sees this dynamic regularly among her constituents. "Their priorities are things like eating. Getting the kids to school," she says. "It's not trying to find where their voting place is to vote for somebody they don't know or trust." Her observation reframes what is often dismissed as political disengagement. The issue is also the matter of a scarcity of time, attention, and capacity. Researching candidates and locating polling places all require cognitive resources that become scarce when families are preoccupied with

securing their next meal. Political participation, then, becomes subject to what psychologists describe as the “scarcity effect,” which refers to when individuals face persistent material hardship, so urgent needs dominate decision-making while longer-term activities (even ones with potentially significant future benefits) are pushed aside (Novotney). Voting is not viewed as unimportant, but as less immediate than the necessities of daily life. For many Arkansans, both rural and urban, the barrier is not solely an indifference to a democracy but rather the exhausting demands of economic survival.

Education

Much of the efficacy deficit traces back to a smaller, upstream problem: civic education. In many rural schools, civic education is often inconsistent. A young Heber Springs Community Center employee described his own schooling in exactly these terms; no one, he said, ever explained that voting mattered in the first place. The mayor of that same city frames the resulting disengagement as a failure of retention rather than access, comparing what residents would need to know something as basic as “your 9th grade civics,” instruction that, in her account, does not translate into lasting habits. In Perry County, one young resident described her school system’s staffing as in constant flux, with roughly ten new hires at the elementary school in a single year. Similarly, a new superintendent left after only one year, and his successor only lasted two. Research on rural teacher turnover finds that high-poverty rural schools experience disproportionately high staffing instability compared with suburban and urban districts, driven less by retirement and more by teachers leaving the district or profession entirely (Ingersoll and Tran). A school system that cannot retain a superintendent for more than a year is poorly positioned to sustain any civics curriculum long enough to take hold, regardless of what the curriculum contains on paper.

Familiarity Over Platform

When trust and free time are both diminished, name recognition tends to fill the resulting gap. Dorotha Love Hall, a non-profit director in Southeast Arkansas describes a mayoral race in Dumas in which a well-regarded incumbent lost to a Little League coach whom parents "happened to know.” She also recalls one winning candidate acknowledging, without apparent concern, that he had made no specific promises during his campaign. “People vote based on who they know,” she says, “not what the candidate offered or promised.” This dynamic is reinforced by low trust in alternative information sources. Statewide, more than 62% of Arkansas voters report little to no confidence that media coverage is fair or accurate (“2023 ARKANSAS CIVIC HEALTH INDEX”). Residents across Perry County and

Heber Springs alike, when asked where they obtain election information, most frequently cite Facebook and informal conversation. Burch traces this shift across her own career, especially during a 2016 campaign defined by frequent attack mailers. “It was what people saw. It was what they heard,” she says. “It was how they formed an impression when they didn’t have one.”

What Could Help

Because the deficit of voter turnout is primarily one of efficacy and trust rather than access, the more promising interventions resemble relationship-building. While expanding broadband access and improving transportation remain important, they cannot, by themselves, persuade someone who believes politics has little bearing on daily life. Instead, increasing political efficacy requires rebuilding civic infrastructure from within rural communities. Research from the Rural Democracy Initiative argues that lasting engagement depends on sustained local organizing rather than campaigns that appear only in election years. Community improvement projects, mutual aid networks, churches, libraries, and other trusted local institutions create opportunities for civic participation long before a candidate ever knocks on a door (“What Works in Rural America”). Representation also matters. Because trust is inherently local, efforts to increase rural political participation are most effective when they strengthen existing community institutions rather than attempting to replace them. Statewide organizations can provide funding and organizational support, but lasting political efficacy is more likely to develop through trusted local leaders and institutions that remain in the community long after election season has ended (“Community Power”).

Schools themselves could serve this function more directly than they currently do. Place-based education (which contains a curriculum built around a community’s own local government and history) has been shown to strengthen students’ sense of civic agency and belonging specifically in rural settings (Hom). This approach may be well suited to places like Perry County, where high staff turnover undermines any civics curriculum that depends on a single teacher’s continuity; because place-based learning is anchored on ongoing partnerships with local institutions rather than individuals, it is structurally less vulnerable to the kind of staffing instability that appears to be eroding civic participation in Perry County schools. Likewise, strengthening local media, including small town newspapers or community radio, offers residents trusted alternatives to the fragmented social media ecosystem that many interviewees described relying on for political information (“What Works in Rural America”). Perhaps

most importantly, civic engagement cannot be separated from material wellbeing. Families worried about food or transportation rarely have the time to research candidates or follow elections. Policies that reduce economic precarity—whether by keeping rural hospitals open, supporting small businesses, or reducing food insecurity—also strengthen democracy by creating the conditions under which participation becomes feasible.

Conclusion

Residents across all three communities, when asked what gives them hope, answer with some variation of something similar. A Perry County restaurant owner, frustrated as he is with local corruption, continues investing his own money in the county regardless. Leslie Natalie, a member of the Perry County quorum court, answers the question of what gives her hope for the future without hesitation: “The people. I mean the people here are amazing. They’re resilient. They love this place.” Although a large number of residents in rural Arkansas have disengaged from voting, they have not disengaged from their communities. They continue to organize local events, advocate for infrastructure repairs, sustain local businesses, and contact local officials, even if they doubt the outcome will change. What they no longer believe is that voting is connected to any of those efforts. Improving rural turnout, then, may depend on demonstrating, incrementally and locally, that participation produces results they already value. Residents of rural Arkansas do not need to be convinced that their communities are worth investing in. They need evidence that voting is one of the mechanisms through which that investment can be facilitated.

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