

Broadband internet can help rural communities connect – if they use it

February 23 2017, by Brian Whitacre



Credit: Tatiana Syrikova from Pexels

Being able to connect to the internet is crucial for many rural Americans. It allows them to buy goods and services that may not be available locally; market their own goods and services to a much larger area;

[connect remotely](#) with health services that previously required several hours' worth of driving; and even [telecommute](#).

Academic studies have found that [broadband access](#) led to more [new businesses](#) in [rural areas](#), and that high levels of broadband adoption were associated with [increased median household incomes and lower unemployment](#) levels for rural residents.

My own research into what broadband can (and can't) do for rural areas, has revealed another potential benefit of rural broadband: increased levels of [civic engagement](#). [Several large cities](#) are installing broadband service in hopes of encouraging people to vote in local elections, join local organizations and trust their neighbors more. But the impacts for rural towns are not often discussed.

Our recent research suggests that, at least in rural areas, [it is not enough to simply provide a high-speed network](#). Rural citizens are already typically [more engaged](#) in their communities than their urban counterparts. Boosting their involvement from its existing level is not as simple as setting up an antenna nearby or stringing a new wire past their home. They actually have to use the internet and explore its opportunities. It is this last step that is the crucial component of a more engaged rural citizenry.

Rural (vs. urban) civic engagement

Rural residents typically [vote more often than their urban counterparts](#). They also are more likely to [volunteer](#), exchange favors with neighbors and [work with community members](#) to fix a local problem. In the academic research community, this is called "civic engagement."

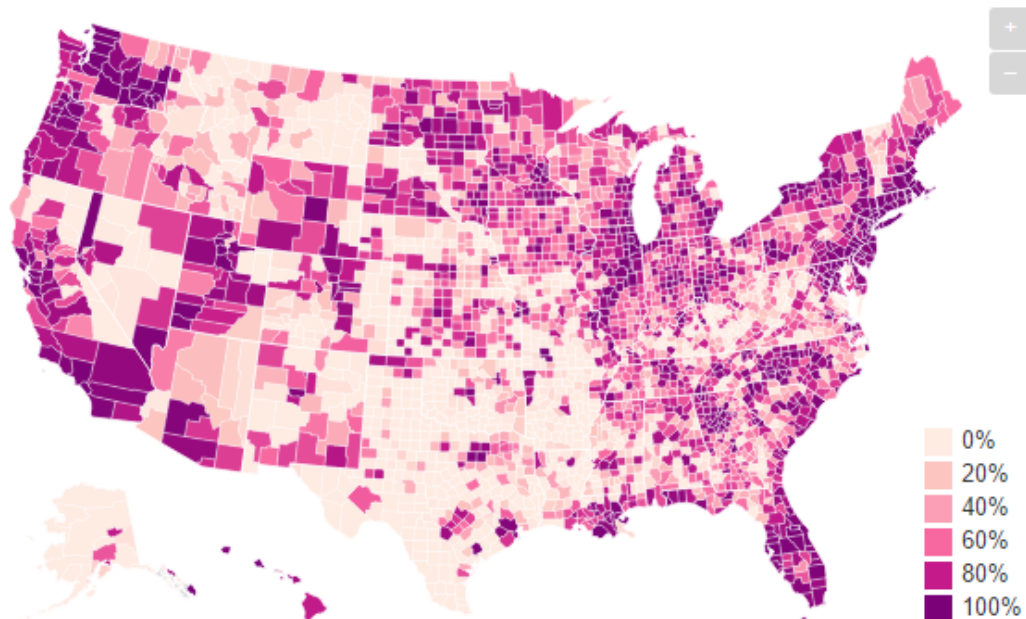
Smaller towns may be more conducive to citizen participation because people are more [aware of what their neighbors are doing](#). Or it could be

because rural residents believe they have a larger stake in their [local community](#).

As the digital age evolves, it seems feasible that people might be influenced by what they see happening online – whether from news-oriented sites, local community websites or their own social media feeds. For example, seeing multiple stories about proposed legislation could lead to concerned citizens contacting a local public official. Alternatively, people could be influenced by their social network's participation in local organizations – or simply be [reminded that it is voting day](#)! Internet use has already been shown to [boost civic activities](#) for the general population; our interest was whether that was true for rural residents in particular.

Internet access in America

In many counties, only a fraction of the population has access to high-speed broadband.



High-speed is defined as 25 Mbps/3 Mbps

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Does broadband matter?

In our [study](#), we wanted to know whether it was just the availability of high-speed internet service that helped people who live in rural areas get more involved in their communities – or whether they needed to actually use the internet before stepping up in person.

Our first analysis looked at state-level data on rural [broadband access and adoption](#) to identify potential relationships between connectivity and rural [civic engagement](#). We used 19 different measures of engagement, such as the percentage of residents who voted in local elections, participation in local community groups and how often they talked with or exchanged favors with their neighbors.

In general, people living in places with high rates of access to broadband service were no more or less likely to be involved in their communities. Similarly, living in an area with very poor broadband availability didn't seem to affect community involvement.

However, a clear and consistent pattern emerged when it comes to broadband use: States with high percentages of rural residents who subscribed to broadband internet service showed higher levels of civic activity. For instance, residents of states like Massachusetts and Connecticut (with nearly 80 percent of their rural households having a home connection) were more likely to boycott a company, join a civic or sports organization, or discuss politics with family or friends.

Interestingly, we also saw signs that some measures of engagement might

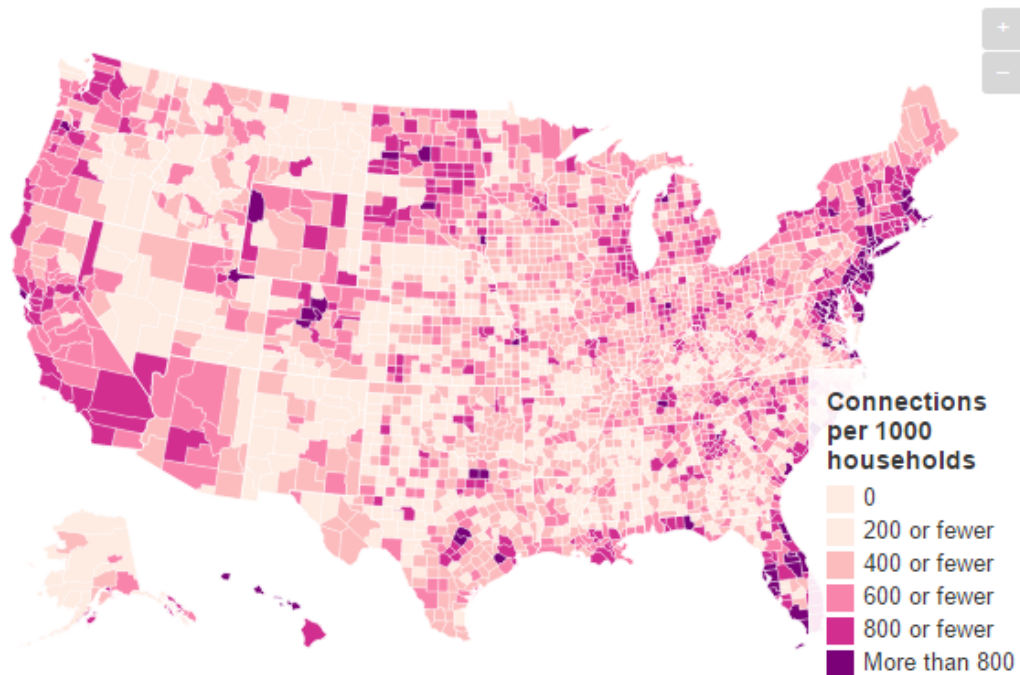
suffer as [rural broadband](#) adoption rises – for example, time spent talking to friends in the "real world" may be reduced.

Looking at individual homes

A state-level analysis is not enough to really draw significant conclusions. There are too many variations across the population, like education level, income, race and age, all of which could influence how involved people are in their communities.

Internet adoption in America

How many people actually subscribe to broadband internet access? The map below shows residential fixed high-speed connections at least 10 Mbps downstream and at least 1 Mbps upstream per 1000 households.



Missing regions are shown in gray.

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But when we used [Current Population Survey](#) data from the National Bureau of Economic Research to look at individual households, we found the same trend was true. Again, people had similar levels of community involvement regardless of their [broadband service](#) availability.

But people living in communities with high levels of broadband adoption had significantly higher levels of engagement for about half of the 19 measures, including boycotting a company, joining a civic or local organization, or discussing politics with family or friends. These remained true even after we accounted for the influence of other household characteristics – such as age, income, race or the presence of children – that have also been shown to affect civic engagement.

The fact that access didn't have much of an effect suggests that encouraging people to actively use broadband is more important for getting them to be civically engaged. Increasing broadband [adoption is not easy](#); however, recent federal policy efforts have begun to focus more attention to this issue.

A changing policy landscape

Rural communities' access to broadband internet service is changing rapidly. More and more people are using [mobile internet services on their smartphones](#). Wireless internet access on mobile phones is [nearly universal](#) in both rural and urban areas, although most mobile connections aren't fast enough to meet the official FCC definition of broadband.

This increasing reliance on mobile connections is changing how people use the internet itself. There is some evidence that mobile connections

are [particularly important](#) for civic engagement among demographics that are likely to be heavily dependent on them, such as lower income or nonwhite populations. How this trend might translate to rural communities remains to be seen.

Most of our federal broadband policy has been focused on [building broadband infrastructure](#). Recently, however, several federal programs have shifted toward getting [people](#) to actually adopt (use) the technology. The updated [Lifeline](#) program provides a monthly US\$9.25 subsidy that low-income consumers can use for a broadband connection. However, [the program's future](#) is still up in the air.

The new [ConnectHome](#) initiative brings broadband access, technical assistance and digital literacy training to public housing residents across the nation. Our research suggests that adoption-oriented policies like these may have some meaningful spillovers for rural areas – namely, improved levels of civic engagement.

Those working in the field of [digital inclusion](#) note that encouraging effective use of [broadband](#) requires more than just reducing the service price. People need what might be called a "support system" when they start using new technology: friends, family members, a helpful librarian or a formal class in an encouraging environment. Incorporating this assistance into efforts to boost not just internet access but internet use will be vital to addressing the persistent digital divide – and can also lead to more civic engagement across rural America.

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